

BILL TALEN AND REVEREND BILLY:

A SHARED JOURNEY

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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As the cultural upheaval of the '60s fought its way into the '70s, Bill Talen began his career first as a poet, hitchhiking the interstate highways from the Midwest to the Coasts eagerly engaging the literary, intellectual, and artistic opportunities offered by those cultural venues. He settled in San Francisco where he earned an M. A. in Theater Arts and joined with friends to open a theatre, "Life on the Water." Here Talen met Sydney Lanier, a minister, who became his lifelong mentor and champion. Lanier recognized in Talen a bold presence which accompanies successful preachers and elevates their sermons. He promoted and supported Talen's move to New York City where Talen fully embraced his role as Reverend Billy and directed the full might of his talents against consumerism—especially Michael Bloomberg's socio-economic goals for the City. Eventually, Talen's critique came to challenge foreign policies that promote corporatism, environmental decline, and the global homogenization of culture.

Talen's body of work is extensive and two strong threads run

through it that are exemplary. One evidences a complete and purposeful disregard for any artistic borders, especially the edgy land between acting and not-acting, including the tiny gradients as one merges into the other. Talen's recognition of the porosity of borders likely facilitated his willing assimilation of his character, Reverend Billy, into his own daily life and persona, until the two merged, endowing Talen, the performance artist, with the skills and insights of a spiritual leader.

The second thread is simply Talen's life's journey from reluctant performer of a religious role, to the willing engagement of that role, and finally the adoption of spiritual responsibility, eventually forming a church and a religion based on activism and a strong commitment to environmental causes. The performance artist became Reverend; the Reverend was born to act. This merging of talents, goals, and dreams created a character who would run for public office. It created a performance artist who would wed lovers, baptize new congregants, and console the grieving.

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To the Saints inducted into Sainthood by the Church of Earthalujah  
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Bill Talen is an actor who has devoted his career to countering social and economic injustice through his widely known persona, Reverend Billy. Even though Reverend Billy was wrought from careful analysis of scripted and improvised performances, theatrical arts, and Talen's social critiques, today Reverend Billy and Talen are as inseparable as any other person's public and private personas. Talen's early engagement with the San Francisco theatre scene in the early 1970's brought him into contact with many performers, who committed themselves to art in order to engage social concerns. Talen took that commitment to the streets and confronted his social adversaries in their own carefully designed buildings and before the global public eye of modern media.

Many come to their life's work with hesitancy, initially overlooking a niche that would first welcome them and then consume their vocational energies for many years. This is true for Talen as well; however, for Talen this welcoming niche was hidden in his playwrighting skills. Initially the idea of a "preacher" did not suit him. He could not envision himself in such a role. A friend's cajoling insights guided him to choices that he would not have otherwise made. When he donned a preacher's collar, and let loose his lanky 6' 2" frame, booming voice, and

grandiloquent style, Talen encountered Reverend Billy for the first time. A televangelist occupied the space that Talen once held alone. The message Reverend Billy broadcast was not Christian conservative, or even a challenge to that theology; rather Reverend Billy preached a fiery demand for human rights over corporate power. He demanded social justice.

Reverend Billy, the televangelist, found the camera's eye in a multiplicity of studios, such as CNN, FOX News, and MSNBC, which vied for his attention as a counter to the pro-shopping message broadcast ceaselessly each Christmas season, not because the networks were anti-consumerism, but because the Reverend provided an amusing counter point to the standard sales hype. He has become a news staple on the Friday after each Thanksgiving as he pleads with the audience to buy nothing, or to buy local, and to remember that true love comes from the heart, not from discounted luxury gifts. Throughout the year, Reverend Billy stages protests of the corporate aggression against local neighborhoods, social injustice, and environmental mayhem. These protests are not strident rages, but staged events that repeatedly lure the media to his performances. As he holds the camera crew's attention, he prays for the viewers' consumerist souls and offers redemption through unique experiences, which are not mediated by corporate advertising.

Reverend Billy tours both nationally and internationally, supporting activist groups with kindred needs and concerns. He shares his theatrical expertise and notoriety, helping to draw media attention, to show solidarity, and to bolster weary spirits. Many years of experience make it almost certain that where the Reverend travels, the camera is sure to follow. His performance style is representative of many contemporary performers who have taken their act to the public stage, garnering attention for their cause by their staging, costumes, and delivery, knowing that the message is of little interest to a media industry which has come to blend entertainment with most news broadcasts. Still, Bill Talen, and Reverend Billy, are exceptional in the extent to which Talen came to embody his theatrical creation, or vice versa.

Talen's journey from solo performer in San Francisco to the leader of a theatrical church in New York City is an intriguing tale of self discovery, vocational growth, and acceptance of an unexpected calling. Talen became a preacher, he gathered a following, he organized a church, and then he finally founded religion.

Written as a professional bibliography, this work traces Bill Talen's theatrical persona from its inception in the San Francisco theatre scene to its modern form which is anchored in New York City and performed in cities around the world. Theatre is both central and essential to Talen's calling, which is a blend of art and activism, fueled by social critique.

Talen's protest performance is an exciting theatrical mingling of televangelism, social perspective, cultural manipulation, and theatre. He centers his work on the character, "Reverend Billy," which he spent many years developing over the course of his career. Of his choice of a pastor modeled after a televangelist, Talen said, "It's important that Reverend Billy not be ordained. ... I'm not a Christian, but I feel the creative force of life, like we all do" (Hawthorne). The characterization of Reverend Billy is a paradox—an over-the-top preacher, recognizable to all as a Christian construction who is not ordained, and who, even as he preaches a path to salvation, is not Christian. Today Talen is almost inseparable from Reverend Billy and has become a social revolutionary delivering forceful social critique in a bombastic theatrical style.

That journey from solo performer to committed preacher of social justice also draws into question the idea of acting and performance. Sometimes it is clear that Reverend Billy is a character being performed, particularly in Talen's early work, but when Talen struggles with issues of fair trade coffee outside of the Astor Place Starbucks in New York City, it seems clear that Talen is not acting, even though Reverend Billy is clearly being foregrounded. This is precisely why a study of Talen's work is so important. Michael Kirby proposed that there is a continuum between what is acting and what is not-acting, and because this represents subtle gradations between the two, there comes a point where

it becomes difficult to tell the difference. “[I]t is precisely these borderline cases that can provide insights into acting theory and into the nature of the art,” according to Kirby (98). Talen’s work inhabits this borderline space as easily as it embraces the extreme ends of the scale. It is often difficult to discern the precise moments when one of Talen’s performances moves from acting to non-acting, or vice versa, as it seems to bounce energetically between the two. The reverberations from those transitions embrace the borderline between acting and not-acting, making it difficult to claim many moments as belonging to either category. Further, Talen’s body of work, as it moved from solo performance to fully-embodied preacher, is also a transition from what is clearly acting, to a representation of authenticity. For these reasons, the study of Talen’s work can provide important insights into the nature of acting and performance.

Talen’s performances have taken place in many venues, but he has favored retail establishments for staging his social critiques which tease at the border, dividing acting from not-acting. He is also very fond of public space, most often communal space, threatened by big box stores, franchised commercial development, or gentrification. He co-opts these spaces to create public forums, hoping to change collective consciousness and slow commercial development. Reverend Billy may

appear in any community throughout the world to speak of the importance of neighborhood over commerce.

Talen's performances are "protest performances," in that he rails against a host of dominant social forces through his work. Harry Justin Elam defines "social protest performance" as "those performances that have an explicit social purpose, that direct their audiences to social action" (vi). But Elam qualifies this idea, going on to state, "My definition presupposes that social protest performances emerge solely from marginalized people and oppositional struggles" (vi). Because Talen seeks to motivate anti-consumerist actors and opposes a pervasive economic system, I label Talen's work as "protest." Elam's definition, written for Valdez and Baraka, may not have been intended for the common people of New York City, but economic power has the ability to marginalize anybody who opposes it. Talen's work represents an oppositional struggle against that power. Elam provides for this broader definition: "Social protest performance is an ever-evolving genre appearing wherever oppressed people assert their subjectivity and contest the status quo" (vi). Talen's effort to protect New York City and its people from gentrification and moneyed interests produces a form of protest performance in keeping with Elam's description of social protest performance. Throughout this text, I refer to Talen's work as social

protest performance because of the many ways in which it demonstrates his explicit social purpose and his calling of his audience to social action.

Elam also draws a distinction between “social protest performance” and “radical theatre,” which is very useful in examining Talen’s work: “I use the term *social protest performance*, rather than *radical theatre*, to indicate that these performances actively protest against very specific and urgent causes of social need” (vi). Radical theatre, according to Elam, stretched the definitions of theatre, by engaging, “in ensemble, nonlinear process and actor-based practices designed to displace the director/playwright dyad as the central force within theatrical creation” (26). Thus, both the specificity and the urgency inherent in Talen’s work align him with Elam’s description of social protest performance, rather than radical theatre, and will be included in my examination of Talen’s performances.

My methodology of examining Talen’s work is a professional biography. It is, however, more than a documentation of his theatrical career because it reflects upon the ways in which Talen’s performances changed over time, and it identifies the partnerships, collaborations, and friendships associated with his work. These cooperative undertakings, together with the social terrain that spawned them, both sustained and restrained Talen’s professional progress by providing artistic sustenance that was eventually left behind as he pursued protest performance.



Talen's artistic enthusiasms initially found expression in the lively theatre scene of San Francisco in the late 1970s. One of his most notable undertakings was the co-founding of the "Life on the Water" theatre company, with three other theatre artists, which was housed in the Fort Mason Center, in San Francisco. The co-founders of "Life on the Water" shared their space in the Fort Mason Center, wrestling with their individual aesthetics as they each worked to craft meaningful artistic social and political discourse. "Life on the Water" supported experimental artistic endeavors by other independent artists as well. It was in this theatre space that Talen created his initial renderings of the Reverend Billy character.

"Life on the Water" produced the *O Solo Mio Festival* in the Fort Mason Center and at other locations in San Francisco in 1990. (Idaho Public Television). The Festival presented the work of solo performers. The manner and content of the solo performance acts which intersected with Talen's work were something "new" when Talen encountered them and joined in their experimental adventure. Of the 1990 *O Solo Mio Festival*, Robert Avila wrote in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* that it was "a jaw-dropping who's who of the form — which enjoyed a real vogue as the most promising segue out of a performance art shtick." Works produced by the *O Solo Mio Festival* appear to have supported and informed Talen's development of Reverend Billy, and storytelling aspects

integral to solo performance proved to be the most compelling features of Talen's work. This resurgence of solo performance, which Talen both facilitated and participated in, continues today.

Talen met Sidney Lanier while performing at "Life on the Water", who, according to Talen's web page, "Our Campaign," was a "cousin of Tennessee Williams and subject of the work *Night of the Iguana* ... [he was] familiar with the re-staging of biblical narratives." Perhaps inspired by his friendship with Lenny Bruce, who incorporated Christian characters in his comedy,<sup>1</sup> Lanier suggested "a new kind of American preacher" to Talen (Hawthorne). Together they researched preacher performances with the intent of Talen using this information to form a new stage persona.

In the mid-1990s, Talen decided on a change of venue and moved to New York City. These years from 1994 to 2001 were a time in which he honed his skill, found his calling, and focused his message. Throughout this period he developed a number of innovative theatrical techniques to dramatize his new social concerns, moving his performances from the theatrical stage to public space, Times Square in particular. He also worked on his acting techniques and oration in order to develop effective ways to attract and hold the attention of passersby

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<sup>1</sup> See Usborne for a reference to Lanier's relationship with Lenny Bruce and Bruce's use of Christian characters in his comedy.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term "the Mouse" here refer to what is likely Walt Disney's

and to compete more effectively with the other street preachers in the Square.

This was a very exciting period in Talen's career because it defined his theatrical work as that of a politically aware performer, and then as a protest performer. Talen, who had been travelling to New York City, and engaging its since his mid-teens, felt keenly the special appeal of the City's unique neighborhoods. The supplanting of those New York neighborhoods by "big box" stores was common in the mid-1990s, and it alarmed Talen, presenting him with a new set of social imperatives. As this political awakening became urgent, Talen decided to confront the newly opened Disney Store in Times Square. In an interview with Mark Hawthorne, Talen described the irresistible nature of his involvement:

When I saw that Rudy Giuliani and the Disney Company were conspiring to arrest people who didn't seem to have money or people of color or small vendors, people who had small, independent shops, [I knew] there was a cultural cleansing going on before my very eyes. I wanted to defend my neighborhood. Reverend Billy hadn't been message-oriented until my own neighborhood was in danger: Here comes Mickey Mouse, here comes The Lion King, and whole blocks are torn down, and anybody that doesn't believably have a credit card is arrested. They are turning Times

Square into a supermall, privatizing the sidewalks. People are getting arrested without making any mistake other than that they don't seem to be middle-class. That gave me a message.

That message led Talen to an extremely difficult adventure, wherein with messianic zeal he chose to confront the massive social structure which supported these economic undertakings. He explained his protests as acts of trespass contrived to save both the individual and the community. Of an action at Astor Place, he said, “We were trespassing into ourselves to steal back our forgotten life while at the same time marching forward into the dominant, commercial narratives. If we remember ourselves, we save our city” (Talen *WSID* 23). Of the unequal share of power he could bring to bear on his cause, Talen said, “It is laughable to think that I can push back the tide of the great anthropomorphized mouse” (Talen *WSID* 43). Nonetheless, he approached his mission purposefully.

To that end, Talen dedicated much of 1997 to investigating the consumer’s embrace of the Mouse<sup>2</sup>, and what an actor might do to

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term “the Mouse” here refer to what is likely Walt Disney’s most famous production—Mickey Mouse. Stephen Watts, a Disney biographer, wrote in “The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life,” that in 1929, Disney expanded his study and released a series of Micky Mouse shorts, which “...made Mickey Mouse a national fad by late in the year” (30-31). Today, Watts states that Mickey Mouse can easily be identified by millions of people all over the world who have

weaken that embrace. Talen used these days—long, repetitive days—to hone his acting skills. He stood in front of the Time’s Square Disney store claiming public space, learning to catch the eye, and giving voice to an open oral argument. Even though Talen had begun working in the theatre in the late 1970s, he was now in unfamiliar space. He was claiming a small piece of Times Square for his performance, and he was learning to shape his oration in such a way as to attract an audience from the crowd of teeming tourists and indifferent New Yorkers.

He surveyed the other preachers in Times Square and chose his particular presentation: “I adjusted my sartorial presentation. I would be a southern guy, like the televangelists, but with a touch of high church...” (Talen *WSID* 43), adjusting his voice “to talking as if someone was [sic] three feet away, the old-monologue-with-no-listener trick” (Talen *WSID* 55). Of his alter ego, Talen wrote, “I remember Reverend Billy then. These were the days after I’d started the ‘character’ Reverend Billy but didn’t know if the role would become more than a strenuous arty irony” (Talen *WSID* 55).

Almost every day, he hauled a pulpit from his apartment in New York’s Hell’s Kitchen to the sidewalk in front of the Times Square Disney

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never heard of Franklin D. Roosevelt, William Faulkner, nor Martin Luther King, Jr. , in part, because the Disney enterprise had “...flooded the United States and indeed much of the globe with short cartoons, feature-length animations, live-action films, comic books, records, nature documentaries, television shows, colossal theme parks, and consumer merchandise” (xix).

Store. He challenged a multitude of consumers to question the influence that Disney exerted over their social and cultural relationships—and through them the structure of society itself. More importantly, during this time Talen honed his talents as an actor: “It was difficult—preaching outside with crowds of tourists and knowing how to catch their eye, knowing how to put certain shapes of sounds out into the air such that you gather people around you, it took me some time to learn how to do that” (Hawthorne).

He dressed in the guise of Reverend Billy, wearing a white suit, preacher’s collar, and black shirt. He assumed the necessary bravado that would allow him to perform in a public space—competing with other Times Square preachers who had come to warn the populace against biblical transgression. As Talen performed, he worked to endow Reverend Billy with the skills necessary to engage an unpredictable audience, to attract attention competitively, and to package his anti-consumerist message within a persuasive, focused performance. From behind Reverend Billy’s pulpit, Talen began to internalize many aspects of Reverend Billy’s proselytizing personality, assuming the Reverend’s calling as his own, and merging his theatrical career with Reverend Billy’s bold work as pastor.

In his book, *WSID if Reverend Billy Is in My Store?*, Talen relates a pivotal moment in his career—his first public intervention. One day he

was working on a script, drifting as he recited it, turning to avoid the images that draped the buildings with one “four-story-high HAPPY WHITE WOMAN” (Talen *WSID* 60) after another, until he found himself facing the Disney Store in Times Square. He says, “I walked toward it like an actual American” (Talen *WSID* 61), the Disney Store appearing as a well-armed opponent. When he entered the store, he assessed it as “the splintered remains of Old Broadway...Disneyfied.”<sup>3</sup> The store was designed as a parody of an old theatre with plastic theatre lights, like big cannons hanging from the ceiling” (Talen *WSID* 62). Disney had designed the saccharine sweetness of the modern Mickey Mouse plush toy with extraordinary care, placed it in the most captivating environment to which the modern marketplace can aspire, and backed it with the might of a financial empire.

Talen entered the store intending to buy something as a bit of “story research” (*WSID* 63), but was entranced by Mickey’s eyes and asked himself, “Can I pay the price for this gaze?” (60). He felt his soul “peeling” and his identity in danger (Talen *WSID* 63) and he says of himself and his fellow shoppers, “[T]he mythic creatures ate us alive”

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the term “Disneyfication” means “...the transformation (as of something real or unsettling) into carefully controlled and safe entertainment or an environment with similar qualities,” and uses the term in this way: “the Disneyfication of a downtown.” Disneyfied is the past tense verb form of Disneyfication.

(63). He felt like a “sleepwalker...[with his] mouth slack” (Talen *WSID* 63). During this sleepwalking trance, he remembered a “dream” about his father’s warning that people will do “bad things to get what you have;” Mickey entered this dream, linking the need for the “necessary violence” his father supported with the “things” represented by Disney (Talen *WSID* 63). He returned from his reverie, as Reverend Billy, when a woman asked, “Are you alright?” (Talen *WSID* 63), charging the woman: “Lady, get out of here, try to escape this place” (65). When he purchased a large Mickey Mouse doll, he then held it above his head and began to preach, “the wrathful spirit sounding like a sonic boom in the store” (*WSID* 65), relying on his “sidewalk theology,” while “manhandling the sweet logo” (65). The New York City Police Department arrested him, embarrassing him as they walked him out of the store, placed him into the police car, and handcuffed him to Mickey, while the police officer mocking him in a falsetto mimicry of Mickey. He told of his fear and of the people mocked him as he sat behind the metal mesh. Lastly he surmised that all that was done to him, and would be done to him, was “necessary violence” (Talen *WSID* 65). His arrest by the New York City Police Department accelerated his transition from self-guided theatrical training and character development to engaged protest performance.

Beyond the embarrassment, the fear, and the violence, Talen saw opportunity in those difficult moments. Inside the store, with Mickey



Mouse grasped between his two angry hands, Talen recognized the Disney Store as a stage, and he was astounded. He described this moment years later in an interview with Mark Hawthorne: “I discovered the thing that I couldn't find anywhere else...going in there and demanding dramatic space inside that retail environment...It's just very powerful” (Hawthorne).

This key moment was both a schism within, and a continuation of, Talen's work. From inside the Disney store he recognized the importance of the retail establishment as a dramatic space which allowed him to construct his art as a counter narrative. This was a setting in which he realized he could engage in a theatrical battle with the Mouse and begin his struggle with this new form of competitive performance in order to speak directly to his chosen audience: the consumer.

It became obvious that his performance had to be stronger than his fear. What might it take to disrupt the relationship between Mickey's carefully constructed engagement with the consumer and to redirect it for fifteen or twenty minutes? While one could imagine any number of audacious scenarios which would shift the consumptive gaze for a moment, it would be a greater challenge to shift this gaze in such a way that the communion between consumer and product is sufficiently interrupted to create a psychic space where new possibilities can be inserted which might challenge the very social construction of the

everyday. Imagine the effort required to shift the consumer's gaze in such a way as to alter it forever. This is the work that he undertook as a permanent calling.

Talen then extended the difficult, committed work he had put into decades of performance training and preparation, his incursion into the Disney Store giving him the insight necessary to fuel his goals of engaging the public in social discourse. This abrupt awakening was like the harsh slap on a newborn's bottom—a time of both exhilaration and fear—the first time oxygen hits the lungs and life is never the same. From this moment forward, “Reverend Billy” was no longer an idea; he became viable and wrathfully alive, as the Reverend Billy. Talen had found a bold new dramatic space, his breath, and his power. He also found the strength to confront directly and publicly representations of corporate power and to advocate for a realignment of social structure and purpose. It was at this time that he added a choir to support his act and to engage his audience.

Talen's emphasis did not change its arc again until September 11, 2001, when he radically altered his relationship to his alter ego, Reverend Billy, and changed the focus of his work to include a robust transnational, anti-consumerist perspective. Post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, Talen's work was mired in personal and professional setbacks, a period Jonathan Dee, writing for *The New York Times*, called Talen's “time in the

wilderness.” Talen had to rebuild his choir as some of them had drifted away after the attack on New York City, and some questioned the ability of their message to articulate a response to tragic and personal loss. Talen also had to reframe his arguments in order to remain entertaining, but to stay gripping and serious as he now struggled with political forces beyond New York City’s borders. Still, he managed to revitalize his career and the Reverend’s calling by recognizing the universal implications of his anti-consumerist message and adapting his performance accordingly.

This was also the time when Talen “became” Reverend Billy, accepting the Reverend Billy persona as his own. From this time forward, Talen began to slip easily between his two personalities, sometimes inhabiting one, sometimes the other, and sometimes a fusion of the two. In the interview with Hawthorne, Talen explained:

People who were living basically post-religious lives, perhaps had not been in a church or a mosque or a synagogue since they were young, but after 9/11 wanted to have a pastor in the community—I would just listen and make suggestions about coping and just reflect on 9/11, what had happened. At that point, I became Reverend Billy. I became fused with the character. Since then, I've married people, buried people. You're standing there hugging the parents of

someone who passed away or something—pastoring is not easy. It's surprisingly powerful. (Hawthorne)

This comment opened onto the complexities of Talen's ability to become Reverend Billy. With regard to this "becoming," Talen's relationship to his character was reflected in his subsequent performances, choice of venues, types of audience engagement, and framing of his message, which I will follow in detail.

Talen's pastoring immediately after the 9/11 is a point in Talen's acting/not-acting continuum in which his work hovers at the not-acting end of the spectrum. Kirby refers to this as non-matrixed representation as the "condition in which the performer does not act and yet his costume represents something or someone" (100). Talen's presence in the crowds after 9/11 cannot be simply non-matrixed, as non-matrixed performers "do *not* do anything to reinforce the information or identification" (Kirby 99). Talen donned his costume purposefully, likely assumed a preacher's manner, and allowed his costume to represent and introduce him.

The eroded borders between the character, the actor, and the fusion presented a problem in writing this biography, as it is really the story of two strong personalities. One personality, Talen, is an actor who originally guided and developed the character that became his alter ego. After his transition, Talen continued to script, promote, and stage the

Reverend's public image, but he recognized that the public often accepted Reverend Billy as the dominant personality. The second personality, Reverend Billy was birthed in social crisis, struggled to tend his flock, and sometimes chafed under suggestions that he was acting. Even though Talen became Reverend Billy after 9/11, the transition allowed both room for either personality to emerge as needed, and for some confusion when it was not clear which should predominate. When I wrote this biography, I came to refer to Talen and the Reverend by whichever name seemed contextually appropriate.

As this is a professional biography, once Talen became Reverend Billy, I most often documented the Reverend's career. As time passed, however, Talen became very comfortable living as Reverend Billy, and for his part, the Reverend sought recognition in areas that required legal personhood, such as during his run for mayor of New York City. At this point, the two personas used Talen's personhood and Reverend Billy's notoriety to gain entrance to political debates, interviews, and social events. This mutual use of personal strengths facilitated an even greater "becoming," a fusion that gave rise to the Reverend Billy Talen.

Along with political needs, Talen also acknowledged a need for a "pastor" in this "post-religious" society. In his interview with Hawthorne, though Talen described himself as a pastor embracing all the duties typically associated with a religious life, he did not turn away from the

theatre. In his play, *Other Love*, in August 2002, Talen, as Reverend Billy, called for a renewed focus on peace. The play also implicated religious conservatism in his arguments: “The only thing that matters is peace. The earth is in flames with every major religious tradition hijacked by their right wing. The language of peace can’t even make it to the History Channel” (Pearlman).

His work such as *Other Love*, as well as his global tours, implied a change in Talen’s message, or perhaps a solidification of it. He continued to preach the anti-consumerist message as evidenced by his film, *What Would Jesus Buy?*, but through his performances outside of the United States, Talen demonstrated a realization that both the threat of consumerism and his audience were global. His international venues and broader social and political messages included anti-consumerism but also implicated the political economic structures that support mindless consumerism. If, in the 1990’s, Talen found himself at odds with the economic forces that contributed to the erosion of New York neighborhoods, after nearly a decade of working through the complicated relationships of cause and effect between community and economics, Talen found broader themes and began to incorporate them into his theatrical protests.

In the eight years after the events on 9/11, Talen has altered his perspective and his church. As I write this, he may be embarking on an

even more spiritually charged phase of his life, founding a new religion, centering it in reverence of the Earth, and naming it the Church of Earthalujah. In this Church, Reverend Billy Talen underscores the common lineage of the social ethics of his work and presents them with the theatrical bravado he has honed over the course of his career, inviting the press to performance previews, and creating a church unlike any other.

This biography seeks clarification of a number questions which underscore Talen's work. First, what range of performance styles were a part of Talen's early career? What theatrical training did he undertake to shift his performance style when he moved to New York? Who were the other performers and media artists that affected Talen's work? What components of his earlier work did Talen integrate into the Reverend Billy character? When and how did he begin to merge his public persona with his Reverend Billy character? Lastly, what artistic and social conditions propelled Talen's evolution from solo performer to a multi-media star committed to social revolution? Throughout this biography, I will hone these questions to focus, with much greater specificity, on the ways in which Talen's performances evolve as his interests, opportunities, and calling changed. In addition, my reading of Talen's written works, with these questions in mind, will show how that work has changed over the course of his career, and it will expand on the ways

those changes engaged him in dramatic argument with a globally interdependent world.

Other issues to be addressed by this study have to do with the specific effectiveness of the “Reverend Billy” character, which Talen strengthened to such an extent that it became his only theatrical tool for confronting social ills and calling for protest against economic oppression. Because of this, I am curious about the role of televangelism in the construction of Reverend Billy. What is it that makes “Reverend Billy” an appropriate critical tool? Is there a relationship between the role of religion and the role of consumption in American life? What is the relationship between the emotional sensation created by a staged religious performance church and that of a shopping mall? What did Talen feel would be lost if his intervention failed? These are not the primary questions of this biography but the answers to them may be reflected in the choices Talen made as his career unfolded.

Tracking Talen’s theatrical work first as a performer, then as an interventionist performer, and then as a politically involved mayoral candidate and global ambassador, discloses the vital role that a strong theatrical background provides the performer activist. In pursuit of his calling, Talen did not follow the lead of protest organizations which often rely on rallies, canvassing, and mail campaigns. Instead, he perfected his oration and presence. However, because his performances are so



entertaining, a particular problem is also introduced, the threat that his art might divert attention from more purposeful, critical grappling with the crucial issues of consumerism and related social systems, a problem Brecht too grappled with.

As no other biography of Talen's professional career exists, I hope this work may serve as a foundation for future research on his theatrical performances and the complex, sophisticated arguments he makes through them. The volume of work produced by Talen means that significant effort will have to be devoted to compiling a chronological record and a framework for it, along with addressing the questions provoked by that endeavor. Even though there are many discussions tangential to this biography that might be inspired by examining Talen's work, my attempt here is initially to adhere to the biographical details, allowing myself a brief analysis along the way, only where theoretical analysis strengthens our understanding of the biography. To this end, Talen's private and public performances, written and spoken words, and claims of message and calling will be central to the investigation, where it will draw material from a wide variety of sources, both formal and informal. These include journals, books, and internet-based interviews and secondary references that document times, locations, and events.

## CHAPTER II

### THE EARLY YEARS

#### **A poetic beginning...**

In the late 60's and early 70's Talen was a well-muscled, long-haired poet, eager for life. Since decades do not break cleanly, much of the turbulence and restlessness of the 60's flowed into the next decade. For Talen the tensions and dreams of the times were as close as the Interstate which stretched endlessly across the Midwestern prairie where he grew up. Between terms at college, seeking opportunity and adventure, he hitchhiked east and west along Interstate 80, and south along Interstate 55 to New Orleans. In traveling he engaged a world of small towns, roadside cafés, truck drivers, and fellow travelers. A napkin often held the promise of a poem. A brief stop might grow longer if work were offered, or a young woman caught his eye:<sup>4</sup>

At truck stops I would write rhapsodic poetry on napkins. I  
loved the dark world behind truck stops, the hidden world of  
small towns with white clapboard facades and strange

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<sup>4</sup> For additional information on this see: <http://www.digihitch.com/article1238.html> "Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping in road documentary." Posted Wed, Oct 17, 2007 by [Salman \(bio\)](#). *Road Culture in Popular Media*

hedges. Then I would get a job on someone's ranch, fall in love with their daughter, stay for six months (Sirius).

He was encouraged in his restlessness by his father's youngest brother, Uncle Harry, just eight years older than Talen, who felt a similar impatience with rural Iowa. Talen recalls him as "a late beatnik, an early hippy, who left town for exotically long periods of time" (*Cooking Harry* 4). Their camaraderie was intense and they took mutual pleasure in their conversation and quick-witted appreciation of irony. Sometimes late at night as he stood by the road, hitching a ride, he would recall his uncle's analysis of the "common gestural themes in Kabuki Theatre and hitch-hiking" (Talen *Cooking Harry* 4).

At just seventeen, his travels took him to New Orleans where he worked as a barker for a Bourbon Street strip club called the Gunga Den (Talen et al. *Barker* "Introduction"),<sup>5</sup> whose owner, Larry LaMarca, complained of the street vendors selling beer without permits (Souther 149). The atmosphere during Carnival in 1967, according to one New Orleans columnist, was becoming overgrown and was an "amateurish experience in self-indulgence" (Souther 150). Meals were cheap; red beans and rice, with French bread, could be had for only thirty-five cents and soup kitchens and rooming houses provided food and a place to sleep (Souther 149).

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<sup>5</sup> Souther (149) termed the club a strip club.

The talent at the Gunga Den was mixed. Steve Eng, in his biography of Jimmy Buffett, notes that Buffett frequently played there and at the Bayou Room during the mid-sixties (75). Sicilians liked New Orleans' climate and owned a number of clubs including the Gunga Den (Eng 76), R&B bands were white, "since the Mafia gangsters who ran the club didn't like Negro performers on the premises" (Eng 76).

As a barker for the Gunga Den, Talen began to develop a lifelong facility for barking at passersby, honing his talent for catching the eye and breaking through to individuals in busy sidewalk crowds. Years later when he produced *The Barker*, Talen says he "specialized in the slang of the sixties," calling out "Blow Your Mind with Cicelia the Scizzors" (Talen et al. *Barker* "Introduction"). His approach was different from the other barkers, who, he said, barked with "big macho sighs" (Talen et al. *Barker* "Introduction"). His style challenged that of his fellow barkers: "The other barkers up and down the Quarter didn't like me. ... They didn't move their faces much because they were covered with shiny scars" (Talen et al. *Barker* "Introduction").

This early picture of Talen on a sidewalk, testing himself against the other barkers, developing his unique style, and honing his physical and aural skills was prophetic. Even though he enjoyed being rooted in New Orleans's vibrant street scene, he would not stay long, because a middle-class child of the plains states has expectations to meet. The

talents, together with the learned physicality, the excitement, and the power to interrupt, would stay with him, long after Talen was called back North to college, where he started at the University of Wisconsin. He then transferred in 1970 to Franconia College in New Hampshire,<sup>6</sup> where he received his Bachelor's degree. Franconia was a small liberal arts college that offered experimental education. Jeff Woodburn, writing for the *White Mountain News* described the college as "avant-garde," with "low acceptance standards, a student draft deferment policy and close proximity to Canada, then a safe harbor for draft dodgers, [which] together made Franconia a popular place for unsettled young people to escape to" (Woodburn). The college suited Talen, who read, wrote, and studied poetry, occasionally taking part in anti-war and civil rights protests (Kalb "Spring Theater").

Talen's poetry in the seventies was broadly visual, with themes that flowed and which are better absorbed than reasoned. In 1974, he published his first books of poetry, *Here it is the One and Only Evening Sky*, *Roadkill*, and *Roots & Cuttings*. Talen refers to the *Roadkill* poems, written when he was on the road hitchhiking, and still tethered to Franconia and the midwest, as "John Ashbery-inspired,"<sup>7</sup> and indeed

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<sup>6</sup> Talen, Bill. Message to the author. Facebook.

<sup>7</sup> Per Billy Talen Facebook message.

critical parallels can be drawn. Describing Ashbery's poetry, cultural theorist Daniel Cottom writes:

[H]is model ... is the quotidian scattering of meaning in a lived environment, in which one must expect language to be diverse in its orientations, initiated and broken off at odd points, smeared with noise, serenely unobservant of dogmatic laws and moralities, and yet capable of all at once flashing into a sense of coherence, as when several conversations overheard at a party may jostle one another into a drunkenly resplendent harmony. (180)

Much of the effects of Ashbery's poetry of a lived environment, with its noise, attendant upon a chaotic coherence and surprising harmony, can also be discerned in Talen's *Roadkill*. As for the quotidian, *Roadkill* is dazzlingly decorated with the imagery of life. Talen offers airplanes as tunnels, glamour magazines, gasoline fish, the spittle in Manhattan's intersections, neon, aluminum roofs, swimming children, speedometers, 25 tons of kosher pickles, Ideal Body Shop, Ball canning jars, sex, hitchhiking, and political annihilation.<sup>8</sup> In one instance, images are curiously tethered, like the gasoline fish, to create: "children to lay in the 12 o'clock lake / aqua pit of ticking children", (Talen "Swimming")

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<sup>8</sup> Talen *Roadkill*.

yielding a sense of time, motion, and season, but lacking linkage to those same summer ideals.

The poems are formally informal, broken, but coherent, containing a thrilling measure of aural joy when read aloud. Talen's affection for language fuels the tension between the poems' words and images. Yet regardless of these Ashbery inspirations, the *Roadkill* poems are not as discordant as Ashbery's poetry. They do not "flash into a sense of coherence," and they do not resemble broken pieces of party conversation that meld into a "resplendent harmony." Rather Talen's struggle with the social, cultural, and political can be discerned in each. The resulting refusal of a "resplendent harmony" is perhaps due to an adherence to a moral thread which becomes ever more evident in his later work. Talen's love of image and language supports the struggle; it does not supplant it. These are important poems, which contain themes that Talen will return to over and over again, balancing the artistic message in such a way that the artistic is savored, but does not overwhelm. They also foretell Talen's future concerns: "I need vaseline to cross the street. I need a car/to keep the manikins off, to back them into neighborhoods" (Talen "Walter Sullivan"). His poem "Autobiography," begins:

I drink to the day housewives rip the tires off  
cement -mix trucks

what they call the concrete jungle cuts  
its teeth  
on my window

In this poem, Talen lays out a view of corporate expansion as a threat, using a housewife pitted against any number of cement-mix trucks to conjure an image of the intimate and the personal against a power capable of constructing a concrete jungle. Since this jungle gnaws at his everyday environment—from his home in New Hampshire and through the towns in which he circulated, hitching and meeting with like-minded poets, Talen perceived the threat of corporate expansion as real and immediate.

His “Autobiography” goes on to suggest appreciation of the people who inhabit everyday life:

The men at the bar are naturally as dark . as free .  
as loving . as tragic . as rich . as quiet .  
as sunsets . as great gray owls .  
as unpublished poems, my own.

In this small verse, Talen anoints the people of his quotidian scene with rich texture and immense value; they are as importantly beautiful as sunsets. The men at the bar are a natural, critical part of life.

Talen also published *Roots & Cuttings* and *Here it is the One and Only Evening Sky* in 1974. *Roots & Cuttings*, co-authored with Robert



Jackson, is a pamphlet that was written to support a series of readings at Middle Earth Bookstore in Philadelphia. Talen's poems make up the first half of the pamphlet, which Jackson's short fiction completes. All of the poems in *Roots & Cuttings* are included in *Here it is the One and Only Evening Sky*, which is solely a collection of Talen's poems.

*Here it is the One and Only Evening Sky* is constructed in such a way that it is difficult to tell the beginning of one poem from the end of another. The title page and introductory lines are at the end of the book. In this way, Talen breaks anticipated patterns and expectations, creating a book not of individual poems, but a book of physically-lived poetic experience.

Talen describes himself as a "network poet" and "professional hitch-hiker" whose "service area" ranges from his home in Landaff, New Hampshire, to Philadelphia. He began this book of poetry acknowledging a struggle he had in naming his work, and calling upon a friend and fellow poet, Marty Watt, to help him to find a "one-word replacement for the self-described 'performing poet.'" His request to Watt asked for a simple word to create a category of art the encapsulated Talen's performance of poetry, but which did not imply a cross "between two or five other forms" (Talen *Evening Sky*).

Where the poems in *Roadkill* seem outwardly focused, with a social and moral imperative, those in *Evening Sky* are more introspective. To a

certain extent they grapple with the everyday. In “Beauty,” he talks familiarly about bodybuilding; in “Just Tell the Story,” he lists the towns in which he has lived; in “The Stuntman Speaks,” he colorfully describes the divide between the star and the copy: “I must extend through soft wood my best catsupped head.” For Talen, the everyday is poetry:

I’ll look the line over when I’m done with the dishes.

(“Beauty”).

New Names for New Dawns. Poetry! (An Anti-War Poem in Three Parts – A Collage).

Yet, where *Roadkill* poems talk about the road and the people Talen encountered, *Evening Sky* seems an internal conversation about his encounter with life, with himself, and with his body. The poems break unexpectedly at times. Thoughts are not followed to completion. The possibility of the poems breaking into clear discourse is impossible, first, because, as in life, a conversation with oneself is often broken at odd places, and the artificial requirements of social conversation are absent, so that complete thoughts are not demanded, and it is possible to know both sides of the conversation—to know what you are thinking—without having to verbalize it.

Secondly, these poems speak of the sensations and urgencies of the body, perhaps, of the body/mind. The body does not require the language of the mind; it senses; it completes; it feels. The tautness of a

limb does not beg complete description. The yearning for a lover does not demand adverbs. The language of these poems becomes a test of the border between the verbal and non-verbal, an elusive, elliptical language, speaking with certain tenets of the grammar of language, but struggling with the physicality of the body, which as Talen writes it, speaks a sensory language:

I can be named for the way I walk down from the bed  
to the brightening kitchen, ("Beauty").

I dig hot spoons. ("Beauty").

I took the position of sitting in a chair  
and she had to sit in a chair too.

We neared death  
like an animal that can't get away from its shape  
and can't get air. ("The Polymer").

Silence is muscular, but lonely ("Even Now").

This body that Talen speaks of extends beyond his own  
physicality to the Earth, to the light, sounds, and creatures of  
nature:

He listens to the absence of light for miles ("The Night  
Weightlifter").

Plants & inner ears  
can't stand the electronic village

of the world  
(“The Rock Star Tells a Story”).

They loved the gray spiders  
that could drop down over our eggs and look or swallow their  
words and bounce back up into the beams. The poets loved  
it (“An Anti-War Poem”).

In the following year, 1975, Talen joined with other poets to  
produce *Black Box: 4*, a recording produced and circulated on cassette  
tape. The poets performed their own work so the emphasis of both the  
words and the breaks can be appreciated. Talen read the opening three  
poems—“American Traditional Chant, “I am William Sullivan,” and  
“Aurora and the Trucker,” each of which came from *Evening Sky*,  
opening his recording with “American Traditional Chant,” in which he  
voiced a mantra that would serve as a touchstone for most of his work  
throughout his lifetime; he said, “[M]y assignment, should I choose to  
take it, William, is get everyone up in the rain on the roof / to ask for  
their own unknowns.”

In these lines, Talen proposes, very early in his career that what we  
do not know, which places us outside of all that society has offered, is  
critically important. It is apparently important enough that he does  
accept the assignment as a lifelong avocation. During his career he will  
find the “unknown” in many forms and recognize its constraint when the

“known” becomes overpowering. He will speak of the “unknown” as residing in the characters of Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Raven*, as being part of an unknown god, and as residing above the logos which inhabit New York City streets.<sup>9</sup>

This theme of the “unknown,” though, has grown in concert with his concerns—both political and social—that the country in which he lives is pushed and shaped by “known” pressures, which if left unchallenged, will determine who we are as individuals, as a nation, and as a society. For instance, he focused on the social and cultural aspects of the United States with his next two poems, “I am William Sullivan” and “Aurora and the Trucker:”

I am what I eat and breathe

What I am pushing is urbanizations of the hurricanes

Increasing varieties of waves...and there’s money in the rise

and fall of the rich. The US and USSR makes me me and

them them. (“I am William Sullivan”)

Here he argues that there are waves of social changes which push identity through exposure to the climate of urban pressure associated with political tensions and flow of wealth. By keeping the everyday in the reading, the listener can sense the connection between the rural, the urban, the national, and the political. In

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<sup>9</sup> This is the beginning of a critical thread that ties all of his future work into a cohesive theme.

“Aurora and The Trucker,” Talen brings the listener to his country’s very rural roots with a typical truck stop request and rejection: “[C]an you give me a ride” and “eh no I can’t take riders.”

Years later in an interview with R. U. Sirius, Talen explained his experiences and mindset at the time he was writing these poems:

For a long time I was a storyteller and bodybuilder who hitchhiked. In other words, I was a simulation Beat Poet who arrived at least 20 years, maybe 30 years late. (Sirius)

Eventually, Talen’s restive pacing of the great interstates drove him from the Midwest. He had grown up in a series of indistinct towns; he now craved the sharp, tangy flavors of the media harbors. He put his thumb out on I-80 and left the Midwest, to return only when he passed through or visited. His calling lay elsewhere and it was time to explore.<sup>10</sup>

In 1976, Talen hitched his way to New York City, hoping to ease his way into the arts scene. When given the opportunity to read poetry at St. Marks Church, which often served as an artists’ stage, Talen seized the moment. He had memorized Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” and performed it enthusiastically, dancing around as he shouted it out to the audience, creating a bold lyrical performance. When Ginsberg walked

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<sup>10</sup> See notes at the end of Talen et al. *Barker* wherein Talen says that he grew up in six identical towns, and that he left his large Dutch Calvinist family and took I-80 to the media harbors.

onto the stage and took the microphone from him, Talen was crushed and embarrassed.<sup>11</sup> Talen felt that Gingsberg deeply disapproved of his performance and he felt chastised, immediately leaving New York for the West Coast where he settled into an artist's life in Bolinas, which he described as "a hotbed of poets, many of whom knew Allen." In his essay "Just Using the Landscape," Kevin Opstedal described Bolinas at this time on his website: "Poetry, Poets and Community in Bolinas, California from 1967 to 1980" and mentions that "[P]erformance artist Bill Talen organized the Move Poetry Series at Mabuhay Gardens" (Opstedal), a series that provided performance opportunities to performance artists. Talen was a frequent performer, as were others including McAdams, Jim Carroll, and the band Amsterdam. Talen did not feel fully in his element in Bolinas, however, and retired from performance for a year.<sup>12</sup>

Still, Talen thinks of that earlier moment in New York with the microphone in hand, dancing and shouting "Howl" at St. Mark's, as a key influence.<sup>13</sup> The power, the ambition, and the audience were all at hand, even if the event did not win approval from the piece's author.

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<sup>11</sup> This according to a note from Talen on Facebook, 2/5/2011. "I sort of danced around as I shout it. Then Allen walked up on stage and took the microphone from me. I was crushed and left New York immediately, moving to Bolinas. That was a strange choice, a hotbed of poets, many of whom knew Allen." See also my interview with Talen attached as an appendix.

<sup>12</sup> This according to a note from Talen on Facebook, 2/5/2011.

<sup>13</sup> Facebook, 2/5/2011.

When Talen returned to the stage, it was with his own poem, "Aurora and the Trucker," about a waitress in a roadside diner, which he performed on a stage, supported by a saxophonist, with a truck cab as a set piece.<sup>14</sup> For the first time, in performing "Aurora and the Trucker," Talen "learned to dance while talking,"<sup>15</sup> creating a personal, poetic performance that grappled with the struggles of everyday life:

EAT HERE OR WE BOTH STARVE

says aurora                      He pisses & orders

& eats & pays & goes around me. I am the poet.

The humor of the diner is boldly painted in the poem, with a lure of Americana. The simple acts of the trucker, ordinary and expected, set up a rhythm that connects this poem to the readers' memories of their own road trips. That connection provides an opportunity to speak beyond the predictable into possibility, where Talen can speak of miles of "downright need" and of "fields cursing under their breath" (Talen *Roadkill*). Talen himself, however, might be the one most affected by this poem, which opens a theme that stays with him for a long time:

. . . for the trucker it is

that he and the identical details of his hands have taken another  
hill

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<sup>14</sup> This according to a note from Talen on Facebook, 2/5/2011.

<sup>15</sup> See notes at the end of Talen et al. *Barker*.



This is the point where the concept of “identical details” first appeared in Talen’s writing, but it would be some time before it became a repeated theme used to charge corporations with incursion into everyday life. The meaning of this concept is complex and likely fluid. To begin with the trucker’s hands cannot be identical of course. The identical details are strong similarities, but they are mirror images, neither the true reality of the other. Even as mirror images, they are not identical, each hand has nuances in appearance that are not fully replicated in the other.<sup>16</sup> Years later Talen would shout:

“I miss New York on *this* spot!” cries the Reverend  
indicating the entryway of a Starbucks shop... From the  
sidewalk of 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue to the clean entry of the Starbuck is  
the portal between New York City and a deterritorialized  
McWorld, floating in its “Sea of Identical Details.” (Lane 300)  
Of Starbucks, which together with Wal-Mart and Disney,  
represents a “trinity of devils,” Talen said:

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<sup>16</sup> It is not possible to clearly determine how Talen’s first reference to and the subsequent uses of the term “identical details” relate to one another. It seems to me as if he saw space taken by like objects and was interested in the relationship between the two. He then became sensitive to the many ways in which space might be occupied by mirrored representations, containing many of the same details. Initially the likeness of the truckers two hands seem an interesting contemplation, and nothing more. Over time, however, Talen appears to have recognized that some identical details were deliberately marketed with an aim to seducing the consumer with familiarity. This poem marks the first hint a theme which would later develop into a mature critique, quite unrelated to its origin.

It epitomizes the killing of neighborhoods, and the demon monoculture, by surrounding us with identical details.

(Roston)

As with the trucker's hands, the details of each store or coffee shop are not truly identical, but they each present a reassuring image of purposefully welcoming familiarity. Customers are invited into these stores as if the interior represented a reality. In fact they represent the hyperreal, as Baudrillard described it: "Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or concept. ... It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyper real" (1). The advertisers of transnational simulacra build signs to lead its consumers to a false reality. The very "identical details" against which Talen preaches are evidence of the false nature of the simulacra. They do not represent the details of any known reality. The simulacra is designed and inserted into New York's vibrant city life, diluting reality, with the hyperreal. Small adjustments are made in the design of the stores and shops to blend with the real neighborhoods in which their designers build them. The "identical details" of franchised neighborhoods are therefore fluid. They are no more identical than the trucker's hands. They do not represent a reality; rather, they seduce with a suggestion of life which has never existed, was born in a marketing department, and cannot become a reality. The simulacra neighborhoods are false to a

greater extent than Baudrillard's suggestion that the map precedes the territory, because in Talen's assessment, no real territory is created. The "Starbucks portal" obliterates real New York neighborhoods, replacing them with a simulacra which is not grounded in any known "real."

Because I am so attuned to Talen's current argument against these corporatized identical details, this line in "Aurora and the Trucker" struck me as noteworthy. It is as if the concept of unvaried imagery struck Talen as novel when he saw the similarity of the trucker's hands, recognizing that they looked nearly identical. Much later Talen would draw this imagery forward to challenge the repetitive details of big box stores and franchises. This thought lay dormant waiting for Talen's realization that this same lack of variation represented the robbery of sensual and social nuance when coldly sponsored by the marketing arms of large retail concerns.

Now settled in California, Talen enrolled in San Francisco State University, in 1973, where he earned an M. A. in Theater Arts<sup>17</sup> and studied under Jock Reynolds, director of the graduate program at the Center for Experimental and Interdisciplinary Art.<sup>18,19</sup> CEIA has been

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<sup>17</sup> "New School University."

<sup>18</sup> Per Bill Talen Facebook message.

<sup>19</sup> <http://art.yale.edu/JockReynolds> accessed June 18, 2011.  
<http://homepage.mac.com/studioarchives/artarchives/yale/faculty/yale.art-faculty.Html>

described as “not specifically a performance art program—it was essentially a ‘misfits’ program, home to students whose interests did not fit neatly into the other, more established departments.”<sup>20</sup>

The following year, on October 30, 1975, SFSU showcased Talen in a poetry reading: “Video Shakespeare,” “The Plan is the Body,” “Philadelphia Rap,” “Sometimes I Speak So Loud,” “My Hands,” “Cabin in Montana,” “Yankees,” “Plan is the Body,” and “Pine Tree Bookstore.”<sup>21</sup> “The Plan is the Body,” written by Robert Creeley, teases away the separation between mind and body (*Selected Poems* 166-67). Including it in his reading that night, he engaged the audience in a discussion about the importance of the body in negotiating space and embodying purpose. Further, the poem exemplified the manner in which Talen was coming to use his body more deliberately in his work. Creeley’s poem relates directly to Talen’s recent adventure in dancing while talking and carries forward his need for a descriptive word that would embody his art—not as a collection of performance categories, but a single word that could capture the necessity and power of the conjoining of bodily presence with the spoken word. “The Plan is the Body” underscored Talen’s appreciation of poetic action, wherein the voice and the spoken words are

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<sup>20</sup> Rabkin.

<sup>21</sup> “Archive Catalog.”

a part of a unified active whole that has meaning far more provocative than performance tools alone could convey.

In March, 1979, SFSU presented Talen again in a forty-five minute poetry reading. This time he read and performed "Past Lives," "That's Life," "I Could Waltz Across Texas With You," "Gary Cooper," "Hitchhiking," "Aurora," and "Trucking Song."<sup>22</sup> Listed as a "performance poet" and accompanied by The Edge Band,<sup>23</sup> this intersection of Talen's poetry with live musical accompaniment illustrates his evolving interest in, and experimentation with, embodied poetic performance.

In San Francisco, Talen connected with Rosalie Sorrels, whom *Billboard Magazine* called "the quintessential female folk performer." In the 50s and 60s her home hosted beat literati, offbeat musicians, artists, writers, and poets.<sup>24</sup> Sorrels's style had a lasting effect on Talen's performance in that it drew his art further into performance and added new forms and complex vocal compositions. Sorrels helped Talen to move from "dance while talking" to a ritualistic talking song, embodied in poetic movement.

Sorrels described one of her albums as a blend of talk with song:

I did an album some time ago that was mostly spoken-word. It was mostly my mother's writing: she was

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<sup>22</sup> "Archive Catalog."

<sup>23</sup> "Archive Catalog."

<sup>24</sup> See Deitz for a brief outline of Sorrels' career and influences.

enormously literate, and she wrote about living alone in a cabin. She wrote very articulately about solitude. I love the writing, and I recorded it with some songs that she likes. (Carioli)

Sorrels' blending of language and song, which Talen as "singing-talking and talking-singing", became important in Talen's work as well: "I'm exploring some of the same issues as the basic Rosalie aesthetic... People say about a good preacher that they are talk-singers. They open up that landscape between talking and singing" (Idaho Public Television). The way in which "Rosalie drops in a song very slowly by repeating three notes and gives you this remarkable context on a chord that wants to complete itself but doesn't...[is] very radical." He notes that the "story before the song is a revolution for me. I'm just very interested in that. I always studied that. I always studied the border between the singing and the talking in a good Rosalie Sorrels concert."

Sorrels begins the song, "Starlight on the Rails," with a paced, poetic introduction, which is clearly not singing, but is also not conversational. Rather her voice and delivery draw the listener toward nostalgia for a world she sees and speaks of, as it it once existed, and might again. As she approaches the song, she draws her words out longer, the space between grows smaller, and eventually she enters a melodic delivery which is clearly song. The change from talk to song is

evident, but in no way abrupt. Her voice and the change in rhythm pull the listener along on an aural journey, lulling and pulling until an almost meditative state is reached, which is open to the story the song delivers.<sup>25</sup>

In an interview with Idaho Public Television, given in connection with Rosalie Sorrels' *Way Out in Idaho* concert on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007, Talen described how he found his way into the theatre scene in San Francisco. Of his life in Bolinas, just north of San Francisco, he notes: "I became homeless and then not homeless and as I became not homeless I was swept indoors by a group of people who are part of the Rosalie Cult" (Idaho Public Television). The home that Talen found in the San Francisco theatre scene began what he called "[a] pretty long phase, almost 20 years" of performance work in San Francisco (Guillén).

Sorrel also taught Talen to challenge other borders—such as the one that restricts the artist to work within a single genre or form: "Rosalie is one of the people who taught me something I've adopted in spades in the Reverend Billy Project. She taught me that those labels [singer, playwright, or performer] shouldn't pull you around. ...[S]he taught me to ... to cultivate my sense of fascination" (Idaho Public

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<sup>25</sup> This according to the song posted on *YouTube*, by paganmaestro, accessed 1/12/2013.

Television). <sup>26</sup> This enabled Talen to build unique performances without concern for how they would read for a certain audience, how they would be packaged, or, even less importantly, how they would be marketed.

Beyond exploring the borders between talking and song, genre and form, this early relationship with Sorrels provided other insights, one of which is related to the role of theme in performance. As Talen says, “[T]here may be a theme that rises to the fore: raising children, labor questions, aging. There may be a theme that rises to the fore in a song or in a cluster of songs, but there is always the presence of a greater theme that informs all the information, all the content” (Idaho Public Television). The way in which a story precedes a song in performance is thus closely related to Talen’s use of theme. The greater theme is always there: “[I]t’s the thing we feel most strongly, as the story before the song is building before it breaks into the song” (Idaho Public Television). However, the group’s ritual is paradoxically inseparable from the individualize story of a singular experience.

This becomes even more complex with the introduction of ritual, which is tied closely to folk music. The music scholar Judith Marie Kubicki describes the relationship between folk music and ritual symbol:

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<sup>26</sup> In this same interview, Talen also says, “Rosalie is a note of trickster sanity against that prevailing falsehood. Hallelujah!” He also explains that, in her work, Sorrels casts aspirations on “the box” from outside of it.



The notion of folk music suggests a type of music which presumes the active engagement of a group, not only in performance, but also the creation of a particular musical expression. This is important, not only for the notion of active participation, but also for the notion of music as ritual symbol. [M]usic as symbol offers the possibility of active engagement, mutual recognition, and identity clarification—dynamics operative in the generation of *folk* music. (54)

Relying on Kubicki's notion of folk music as a form of group ritual, Talen's hope was to produce a similar sense of the ceremonial regardless of their fit within the folk genre. But he also recognized the necessity of both group and personal story: "[T]his is something I learned from Rosalie Sorrels ... The song is the completion of the ritual, but the going-to-the-ritual from her personal life is a statement that is beyond the content that we all sense" (Idaho Public Television). In this same interview, he also noted the necessity of both humor and the recognition of suffering: "[I]t's an undying, implacable and rascally sense of humor that must be brought to the most egregious sorrows that life is going to bring you" (Idaho Public Television). In Talen's work, ritual appears to be

involved in moving from the personal to song, and it works best when this ritual uses humor to underline great sorrow.<sup>27</sup>

One of Talen's early San Francisco performances, in 1979, was in the Eureka Theatre, which Idris Ackamoor, of Cultural Odyssey, recalls producing "a Midnight Series featuring some of the most ambitious and experimental new performance artists in San Francisco" (Brey).

Ackamoor noted that the Midnight Series included Winston Tong, Rhodessa Jones, and himself, performing with Cultural Odyssey (Brey). In 1981, Talen performed in a play, "Tales from the Palace Walls," with O-Lan Jones, Julie Hebert, and Susie Rashkis, at the Intersection Theatre, when it was in North Beach, in San Francisco (O. -L. Jones). Reminiscing about his work in the late '70s and '80s, Talen recalled, "I was in a lot of little black box performances with duct tape and coffee can lights" (Guillén). Talen also participated in the San Francisco International Theatre Festival as a performance artist, along with Jim Pomeroy, Pons Maar, Tom Marioni, Rachel Rosenthal, Suzanne Lacy, and Michael Peepe (Loeffler and Tong 489).

In 1981, after seeing Talen in a performance at the Boarding House, a French producer invited him and his troupe to the World

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<sup>27</sup> In the late 1970s, Talen referred to Rosalee Sorrels as one of his mentors. "And, ... another example would be Spaulding Gray and Kurt Vonnegut. Rosalie Sorrels is in this group of people that I have focused on who have reinvented celebrity. Spaulding called it 'horizontal theme'" (Idaho Public Television).

Theater Festival, in Nancy, France, in the fall, (Talen *Cooking Harry* 15). During the Festival, they stayed in a 16<sup>th</sup> century hotel, which kept exotic animals on the grounds for the performers' entertainment. They ate communally, with other performers—seven days of meals of pork and then a meal of tripe—in a large tent, set up by the hotel (Talen *Cooking Harry* 18) . One dinner gathering of the 200 American performers and 100 Parisian critics and journalists included a mock cavalry fort (Talen *Cooking Harry* 17).

The Festival theme was “USA Theater” and its participants included a variety of what might be called “iconic” American performing arts groups, including a black male group representing the Mardi Gras, a redneck banjo and fiddle band, and an S&M punk ballet. Talen recalls that he was a token, “the San Francisco rocker” (Talen *Cooking Harry* 17) and that he and his fellow performers had been invited to participate in a grand parody—“sickly twisted American myth types” (Talen *Cooking Harry* 17). The French audience saw them as a living representation of Americana: “[W]e are larger than life to them ... we're Californians” (Talen *Cooking Harry* 17).

Talen performed a piece, “Fables Rock,” later to be reprised in a show, “Cooking Harry,” in which he caricatured his Uncle Harry. The stage was larger than anticipated, but Talen “pumped up” his choreography, with explosions of light and sound (Talen *Cooking Harry*

16). His show was based on his relationship with his uncle, with whom he had once been very close, but with whom the relationship failed as they took different paths in life. Talen continued to pursue the open road and the arts, while Harry settled into mild, middle-class conventionality.

Foreshadowing Talen's critique of advertising in New York City, he described his theatrical projections used in the French production:

Outside, two-story high scaffolding structures hold industrial strength slide projectors, like pillboxes, broadcasting one hundred foot high Pterbilts (sic) and Mickey Mouse and Liza Minellis on the sides of 15<sup>th</sup> century palaces. (18)

Talen later revisited the work he performed in Nancy, when he wrote a loosely autobiographical piece, *The Barker*, in 1983. The title recalls his 1967 work as a barker for Gunga Den and then implies a relationship between barking and his subsequent work, suggesting that Talen himself is a barker, barking his message from sidewalks, public spaces, and theatrical venues, as the opportunities arise.

Talen's introduction to *The Barker*, like many of his poems, began on a bar napkin in the Tosca Café in San Francisco, as he sipped a cappuccino (Talen et al. *Barker* "Introduction"). Only Bourbon Street, 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, and North Beach had any true street barkers, Talen claimed,

describing them as “political representatives, speaking to us from the dark side of free speech” (*Barker* “Introduction”):

While this American archetype still survives from the snake oil/soap-box days...might as well use him. THE BARKER is to The Media what Daniel Boone is to the space program. That’s the mouth I want to put words in. The clarity of the straight con. Not the tube, either...a con in the great outdoors. (“Introduction”)

There are nine skits in *The Barker*, which opens with a skit of the same name. This work is influenced by his poetry, but it is laid out as a theatrical piece, with notes about allegorical space, sound, and light, as parts of a lyric performance piece. *The Barker* skit is also fresh because it diverges from solo performance, incorporating two acting parts, the barker and a performer in the sex show, Silvie. By incorporating Silvie, who speaks her own story, Talen wrote as a playwright rather than a performance artist. He had found his own voice by the time *The Barker* was written; the acting parts have poetic rhythm that is reminiscent of his poetry, but not of his poetic influences. The barker barks announcements about the features the show, calls a potential male customer, and talks to Silvie, who also speaks to the audience about her life and the choices she has made. To a male customer the barker calls:

You there sir, free look? No obligation. You'll get no pressure  
from the topless philosophy majors who will show you to  
your table in total darkness.

The voice turns "ghoulish" when the barker asks: "Don't you want to join  
the circle of voyeurs / Who sit in the dark Gripping their drinks /  
Turning into nothing but eyes?" (Talen et al. *Barker*). The words  
"nothing but eyes" contain a warning about being a voyeur rather than  
an active participant, and they are repeated at the end of the skit. The  
skit does not read as personal history, but Talen's experiences at the  
Gunga Den are incorporated.

The remaining skits capture Talen's struggle for a future  
independent of his Midwest past. "Men in Space" speaks of his youthful  
restless desire to "slide two thousand miles away":

I've got to disappear.

Got to get strange.

Or maybe give, up get a job. .

There's nothing here to change.

"Slow White Heterosexual Man" continues the theme of discontent with  
everyday life that has not been made strange. It is the tale of a man of  
about forty, accepting his daily drive from El Cerrito into San Francisco,  
then back home, and his anticipation of weekend barbeques. The slow,  
white, heterosexual man says: I'm a happy man because I accept just

what I am. Next, “American Yoga” defines American yoga as that time when time stands still during a traffic accident, implying, perhaps, that American rest and meditation come only during those moments when Americans lose control of their goals and wait for an outcome beyond their control. “Hello/Split” continues Talen’s debate about purpose and direction, revealing a struggle with a feeling of personal division: “When you split in two so you are who you are, / But you’re someone else just as much” (Talen et al. *Barker* “Hello/Split”).

This skit is a critical analysis of Talen’s choices which, while voluntarily made, were deeply disconcerting, from leaving his family’s Calvinist faith, to testing the drug culture, through to the loneliness of beginning fresh without family, faith, or familiarity at hand. The final lines are particularly moving in that they create a sense of running from one’s self:

When you give up, stop going faster and farther,  
but you secretly hope that the other one will stop  
looking too, stop looking for you, and not even feel  
the need, to say  
hello

The past still pursues him and the roads not taken still pull, but hope promises to outrun what was or would have been. The “giving up” evokes weariness in the struggle for separation and a hope that the

“other” might lose interest in following and that there may be, after much speed and distance, a quiet place where Talen can finally accept the person he has become without feeling the cleft that split him in two when he left the Midwest.

At the San Francisco International Theatre Festival, Talen played a “media invalid,” who cured himself of his addiction to media by taking a birdwatching trip in central Nevada. The skit, “Birds,” is likely the text of that performance. A passionate connection with nature allows the invalid to experience great emotion and resolution, which he had not been able to experience otherwise. For instance, the skit creates great tension between the beauty of the birds in the sky and those that have gone extinct:

The curlew uttered through its three inch beak...the final cry  
of its kind. We birdwatchers stood frozen in love with the  
horror of unrepeatable rarity. (Talen et al. *Barker* “Birds”)

Talen also issues a dire warning that “any activity has the potential for excess.” In birding, excess comes in the form of competition for the sighting of rare birds. That excess shifts the birders’ focus from the unique beauty of the bird to the thrill of competition and, in doing so, destroys the bond with nature. The skit ends with both the positive rapture of seeing and admiring the ubiquitous red-tailed hawk and with



a cautious note that the scream of the red-tailed hawk is much like that of a man exhausted by power ("Birds").

The next skit, "Kamikaze Dada," appears to accept the loss of youthful aspirations, noting that in the face of modern media, poetry cannot communicate effectively with society. Talen writes:

Used to be you could get away with anti-heroism. You  
could write poems of desperate love on napkins in  
cafes and read them silently, surrounded by strangers.  
But now words are off the page.

Now communications are electro-chemical.

If you don't have the money to buy the networks, you  
can buy the time by doing death.

For example, a couple of years ago, a Pilippino (sic)  
poet jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge and landed his  
poetry on the front page of a daily with a million  
readers. He jumped hand-in-hand with his niece all  
the way down. And they missed the water.

Very electro-chemical.

Way beyond anti-hero.

Talen had come to recognize that, in order for his voice to be heard, he would have to compellingly confront an electro-chemical force which cared little for the careful deliberations of the poet. Because the world

had changed dramatically since the days when he hitchhiked and wrote poems in roadside cafes, the *Roadkill* poems would no longer suffice. Communication in Talen's world was no longer ink applied to paper but a media-controlled event that required bold action, one which would require a physical commitment performed before the camera's eye and might even demand your death.

Having brought his audience to a confrontation with media in "Kamakazi Dada," Talen adopted the persona of a televangelist in order to preach against the dangers of television in "The Church of Eternal Life Through Mutation" (Talen et al. *Barker*). Acting as a televangelist, Talen preaches that "God himself has instructed me to instruct you through the radiation of your color TV that Your Time Has Come!" (*Barker*). According to the sermon, God, using radiation and cancer, is mutating "into Eternity those citizens who faithfully play the TV game shows" (*Barker*). The skit ends with the preacher's realization that he has lost a Faustian game and he begs "GOD" to cancel his afternoon soap opera and to kill the canned laughter (*Barker*).

I would like to say more about this first glimpse of Talen as a televangelist berating his audience's involvement with television and the perils they will face because of it, but it is a very short skit, and it is a role he had yet to fully embrace. It is not Reverend Billy; Talen describes the preacher impersonally: "a preacher harangues from the tube" (Talen

et al. *Barker*). Hidden from Talen is what the future holds for him in this nascent image of radical televangelism.

In light of who Talen would become, for me, *The Barker* ends anticlimatically with a trip back to the Netherlands, for a genealogical vacation in the skit “Home Movies.” This time, however, Talen implicates the Super 8 video camera in mediating authentic experience, rendering travel into tourism. With a Super 8 video camera, even as you explore, you are thinking about how “[y]our vacation will expand at room temperature back in the States,” thereby, contaminating the experiential with external influences. As an example, Talen highlights the filming of family grave sites as evidence of a failed connection with the very history the tourist intended to explore:

Your Home Movies will throw graves across a white wall  
for your lovers and wits.

In spite of themselves they will catch the obscene irony  
in your pose with the stone.

(Talen et al. *Barker*)

In addition, he argues that should the Super 8 movie fail, conversation about the trip will not be accepted by your friends or family, and your vacation will remain unproven. The great loss in this approach to traveling is the loss of an imagined but heartfelt ancestral connection:

Will it all come back?

How we once let our dead  
take long walks in our dreams.

Talen's work provoked a powerful image and a strong desire in the audience, which is shattered when home movies become the central focus of the trip. He tells how an attempt to read the grave marker in the grass more clearly leaves the traveler/tourist suddenly struggling with the language of the ancestors and the unexpected joining of the future with the past. When that happens, the explorer says to the stone, which stands as evidence of his ancestors: "I have your eyes. This breaks the spell of the home movie; the tourist becomes traveler and claims his physical connection with the past, which cannot be captured on Super 8 film."

Talen's performance of "Slow White Heterosexual Man," in "The Barker," presented at the Great American Music Hall, in February, 1983, was also recorded for *High Performance Artists Doing Songs*, at Harbor Sound, in Sausalito, California, with Greg Douglas on guitar. Talen wrote the lyrics, and produced the work.

Late in 1984, *High Performance* carried reviews of Talen's work again, both individually and in the Museum of Contemporary Art's *Carplays* festival (Loeffler and Tong 503). MOCA described *Carplays* as a festival which produced, in collaboration with the Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum, a series of short plays "that explored and

dramatized the ways in which automobiles touch our lives” (Museum of Contemporary Art). According to *Artweek* magazine, Talen performed his poem, “American Yoga<sup>28</sup>,” in the *Carplays* festival on October 6, 1984 (*Artweek*, v. 15, 1984). The Festival “consisted of fifteen specially-commissioned short plays, visual set pieces, and performance art events which took place in a variety of indoor and outdoor settings” (Museum of Contemporary Art).<sup>29</sup>

Talen’s work connected him with theatres and artists in New York, as well as in San Francisco. In 1984, Deborah Slater was a “leading San Francisco-based [theatrical] experimentalist,” according to Jennifer Dunning of *The New York Times*. She conceived of, and directed, *Work from Memory Trilogy*, which she produced in collaboration with Bill Talen, Bill Fontana, and Regina Jepsen. The *Trilogy* was presented at “the Public Theater’s LuEsther Hall, as part of Joseph Papp’s Festival Latino en Nueva York” (Dunning). Dunning’s review was damning and sarcastic, as she found the work to be “locked in cliché.” Of the first piece, *Pieces of the Frame*, she wrote:

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<sup>28</sup> *The New York Times*. September 4, 1984, Tuesday, Late City Final Edition: Other pieces tried to use the car more figuratively, as in a monologue called “The American Yoga” by Bill Talen - a meditation on a hit-and-run accident.

<sup>29</sup> Other participants included Bruce D. Schwartz, Rachel Rosenthal, Rudy Perez, Shelley Berc, Leon Martel and Elizabeth Ruscio, Spalding Grey and Marshall Efron, Whoopi Goldberg, Alexis Smith, and Chris Burden (Museum of Contemporary Art; *Artweek*, v. 15, 1984).

The three-part presentation opened with an examination of memory called *Pieces of the Frame*. A woman searched languidly through a small box, pulling papers from its drawers to the sounds of foghorns, children playing and a music box. As she pored over the contents, a second woman sat atop a box moving her arms semaphorically, suggesting a child at play in a sandbox. A third woman swung from a ladder. A fourth, unseen, poked through cloth covering a window looking onto the scene. A crumpled paper moves as of its own accord across the floor. The searcher pulls off her face, a rubber mask, and shuts it away in the box. Oh, symbolism. (Dunning)

Of the other two pieces in the *Trilogy*, Dunning was equally unappreciative. Talen and Slater produced the text for the second part of the *Trilogy*, "Present Past (Rock 'n' Roll)." Dunning credits the actor with saving this questionable work:

"Present Past (Rock 'n' Roll)," a second section choreographed (sic) by Priscilla Regalado, was set to enjoyable rock music of the 1950's and 1960's. But could there ever have been a high school so crammed with oafs and stereotypes as the one depicted so unequivocally here? Helen Dannenberg does almost break through the ugly

would-be humor with a wry portrait of a clod who cannot learn to dance.

“Future Memories” held more appeal for Dunning, who appreciated the gymnast saying, “[S]he performs with a meditative coolness that offers some relief from the clutter [of the plastic jungle].”

In spite of such negative reviews, by 1985, at thirty-five years of age, Talen had made a solid commitment to the arts and performance, his educational training having provided him with a broad approach to the arts. Not only had he learned the techniques of performance, he had learned to use technology and opportunity to sculpt theatrical expression. His social network consisted of others, like himself, toying with and enjoying the possibilities that the arts communities, friends, and personal talents afforded.

Who he was, and who he was poised to become, presented Talen with daily incongruity. Talen had been born into a Dutch Calvinist family in the Midwest in 1950 and spent his childhood in South Dakota, Iowa, and Minnesota, where he was raised in conservative Dutch Calvinist traditions (Kalb *Play by Play* 109).<sup>30</sup> As a result, he had no way of knowing there were theatrical venues awaiting him in San Francisco and New York, which would connect him with performance opportunities throughout the world. In 1985, he was no longer culturally Midwestern,

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<sup>30</sup> This was also noted in the play *Cooking Harry*, page 1.

but his formative experiences, his family, and his history were intimately tied to his very conservative Dutch Calvinist upbringing. His uneasy relationship with Dutch Calvinism hampered his artistic vision as he was reluctant to engage his past for performance purposes: “[A]s a recovering Dutch Calvinist, I didn’t even want to spoof a Christian” (Talen *WSID* 31). He would have found it impossible to construct the Reverend Billy character without breaking free of this stricture.

James Bratt, author of *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture*, describes Dutch Calvinism in such a way as to suggest that Talen, even though he might be uncomfortable with the tenets of Dutch Calvinism, nonetheless may have been influenced by Dutch Calvinism’s emphasis on a unified life view: “[I]f there is one thing these people have insisted on, it is that religion includes all of life, that it stands as the source and judge of all other human activity. Consequently, the group has for decades applied the lens of its faith to American society and culture, to political events and social theories, to art, science, and scholarship” (vii-ix). Remnants of the Dutch Calvinist perspective clearly remain in Talen’s critique of modern American society. While he may have rejected the actual tenets of his childhood faith, he nonetheless viewed contemporary political, cultural, economic, and social structures from a critical perspective which embodies “all of life.” Even though Midwestern Calvinist politics became



the antithesis of Talen's purpose and life's work, he retains the Dutch Calvinist skepticism of the consumerist utopia.

Further complicating Talen's struggle with Dutch Calvinism is his use of images and home movies of his South Dakota childhood in his movie *What Would Jesus Buy?*, which was released in 2007. As we watch Talen and his sister playing the piano, we have little trouble seeing the contrast between those images of "home" and the garish, sterile images of mall shopping shown throughout the film. This juxtaposition discloses features of Talen's Dutch Calvinist upbringing that he still treasures, and that he might want to promote as a solution to many of America's consumerist ills. Dutch Calvinism also informs Talen's artistic expression. In a *Newsweek* interview, he was asked: "You were raised a Dutch Calvinist. Is your upbringing reflected in the persona of Reverend Billy?" Talen replied, "I don't think anybody can deny that their life is inside their lifework" (Braiker).

Talen's childhood engaged a tense Dutch Calvinism, which was faced with the broad cultural revision brought about by the post-war exuberance of the 1950s. Bratt writes that the 1950's of Talen's childhood were "a tougher challenge" for Dutch Calvinists than the "unparalleled calamities of the '30s and '40s [which] had somehow sadly fit expectations" (187). Those calamities began with the financial collapse that began the Depression and many years of struggle that was

eased by the outbreak of World War II. The relative peace and hopeful expectations of the post-war 1950s were challenging to Dutch Calvinist austerity. Members of Talen's mid-century Calvinist sub-culture partook "of the move to suburbia and the plunge into [the] consumer utopia of the '50s ... [wherein] questions of Americanization dominated attention..." (Bratt 187). Dutch Calvinists saw within this utopian promise a rival philosophy and responded: "Calvinist politics Grand Rapids style at last came into its own ... [proposing] a platform of 'clean government,' merit appointment, and suppression of public vice; they decorated it with all American rhetoric..." (Bratt 188). In his complex relation to his own subcultures, Talen decried the society and people associated with these politics: "These are right wing hooligans who walk up to you looking like Boy Scouts. Blackwater USA comes from Holland, Michigan. My family prays with those people" (Del Signore). Other Dutch Calvinist tropes deal with the acculturation of the Dutch in America as that relates to "Americanization" and "modernization" (Bratt x). This Dutch Calvinist distancing created a sub-cultural perspective which may also, ironically, have allowed Talen to skirt the borders of American culture as it fueled his critique of modernization, America, and consumerism.

Eventually, the struggle with his cultural inconsistencies led Talen to compose the solo performance piece, "Cooking Harry", in which he

created an appealing mélange of his personal and professional worlds and dealt with the incongruities of the past, present, and future. What were likely familiar topics of internal conversation became a public conversation about past expectations, family ties, loss, and future possibilities. Neither the past nor the present, with its future promises, escaped probing by Talen's deft wit and clarity of vision. This artistic strength always resided in his ability to see underlying truths in social settings, which suited his critique of his family's surrender to suburbia in his then-and-now story, "Cooking Harry," very well. Talen stages this play with him and his Uncle Harry alone on the stage, Uncle Harry, a memory recalled through the script. As the tale unfolds, Talen explains that the rest of the family is just off stage:

This is Harry at the family reunion.

The other adults are back at the main house

They are Dutch Calvinists—and most

of their talk is what I would describe as

“God-fearing gossip” (Talen *Cooking Harry* 1).

Talen stands alone on the stage with Uncle Harry and his own past and future hopes and expectations.

Ostensibly, "Cooking Harry" may be read as a roast of Talen's Uncle Harry, but most reviewers understood that the story was much more about the storyteller than it was about Uncle Harry. In it, Talen

reconciled himself with his familial Midwestern relationships, while exploring the possibilities and limitations of theatre. He addressed the problems of audience expectation in particular, acknowledging the difficulty of making his voice heard, literally and figuratively; his personal struggle with his two opposing cultural identities gives “Cooking Harry” its power. The play, because it examines Talen’s contradictions so frankly, uniquely anchors Talen in the confluence of his two paradoxical worlds.

When reading this play, you may glimpse wisps of Reverend Billy in Talen’s reaction to a Midwestern tornado alert:

Now that I’m back in the Midwest I’m ready for some wind  
in my face, Deuteronomy weather. “And the heavens  
parted and the lord saith FUCK YOU I’M GOD!” (Talen  
*Cooking Harry* 2)

When I hear these lines, I hear Reverend Billy speaking long before Sidney Lanier asked him to perform. And it is Reverend Billy’s yearning I hear, when Talen says, “I’ve always wanted to talk absolute strangers into talking back” (Talen *Cooking Harry* 10), a line that is repetitive later in the play, emphasizing its importance.

When I read about Uncle Harry’s physicality, I feel as if I am reading a description of Reverend Billy.

What does Harry look like?

His face is not necessarily handsome; it's dramatic.

His expressions are so strong that you wonder if his face changes his moods, instead of the other way around.

I think he does something to his hair. . it's a little too brown-blond, you know like a TV weatherman.

You don't notice his vulnerability because he's always in motion, cracking jokes.

Watching you from behind these blinding gestures. (Talen *Cooking Harry* 2)

Talen also included many consumerist critiques and images in the play:

Is there a beer commercial nearby? (1).

The shopping mall telling me to have a career (6).

I am cooking Harry in the sense that as an artist I'm processing Harry, making him something to consume (9).

I'm putting myself on stage to be consumed... (9).

I want to drink a golden automobile (12).

What's your gasoline brand? (14).

We are separated from them by the toothpaste(sic) shield of SELFCONSCIOUS ART (18).

There is an amusing, yet clarifying, line, which underscores much of Talen's work: "Redemption through self-caricature" (Talen *Cooking*

Harry 4). How long, I wonder, has Talen been working through this redemptive proposal?

After Uncle Harry's barbeque, the play continues with Talen's hitchhiking to New York City, where he catches a plane to Paris on his way to the World Theatre Festival in Nancy, France—the same festival Talen did attend, as discussed earlier. A theme of the festival was American theatre, and Talen had been invited to perform there by a French producer who had seen his work and thought it would be a good match for the festival. In this section, *Cooking Harry* becomes a play within a play as Talen performs a roast of “Harry the American” for an imagined, or remembered, French audience.<sup>31</sup> After the French performance, Talen reset the stage for an intimate discussion with his audience. He explained to them that the events of the performance had taken place four years prior, in 1981.<sup>32</sup> Talen wrestles with the intersection between the “authentic” and caricature as the play concludes; he was a caricature in France; he shaped Uncle Harry into a

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<sup>31</sup> Talen participated in the 1981 World Theatre Festival, in Nancy, France, but there is little documentation of the event and only some archival material exists in the National Library. In *Cooking Harry*, Talen describes the theme poster for the festival as “a montage of an American diesel truck crashing on two praying European peasants” (15).

<sup>32</sup> Talen critiqued his French performance, noting the confusion the audience might have experienced over the words, the effect the mystique of California might have had on the French perception of his work, the surprisingly large size of the French venue as it affected his ability to be heard clearly, and the interpretation (or misinterpretation) of the sexual innuendos in the play (Talen *Cooking Harry* 16).

caricature; and, sometimes, he misses the caricature of the Midwest: “I wouldn’t mind coming back for a while” (20). He also recognizes that he himself is from the Midwest, which also generates culture: “Primary culture doesn’t have to come from the coasts” (20). Accordingly, culture is generated, influenced, and amended by those, such as Talen, who are born outside of the cultural hubs of the East and West Coasts. Talen concludes by thanking Harry for showing him the way out of Iowa (20), giving him an opportunity to participate in the broader cultural milieu.

A few years later, Talen composed the play, *Cooking Harry*, based on his life experiences, and incorporating much of his performance in France. He first performed and presented it at the *Magic Theatre* in San Francisco in 1985, under the direction of John Lion (*Magic Theatre*).<sup>33</sup> Later, when it played at the *Cast Theatre* in Los Angeles, Janice Arkatov, the *Los Angeles Times* reviewer, explained the title, suggesting that the “cooking” referred to the manner in which Talen “roasted” his uncle. Talen, however, spoke of the play differently: “It’s a true story expressing some of the disenchantment with the gentrification of a man who’d meant a great deal to me” (Arkatov). It was not so much that Talen was cooking, or roasting, Harry, as that Harry’s social expectations consumed his uncle.

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<sup>33</sup> See: <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/data/13030/00/tf7q2nb300/files/tf7q2nb300.pdf> See Ctn 9, Folder 5 for *Cooking Harry* info. University of California, Berkeley, California, The Bancroft Library

Though Talen's Uncle Harry was only eight years older than he was, Talen explained that Uncle Harry "was, when I was growing up, sort of my vision mentor. We did things together, traveled together, there were rites of passage that my uncle . . . made possible." The arc of Uncle Harry's life began to diverge from Talen's as they aged: "[Uncle Harry] adopted an income, a backyard, kids, a pool—and a barbeque, the icon of this piece" (Arkatov). The barbeque, which was the focus of the set and was symbolic of the Iowa in which Talen grew up, was a metaphor for the manner in which Harry's life choices were brought into line with societal norms: "He become boutique-y, middle-class. That's what happened to Harry" (Arkatov). Talen was resentful of his uncle's abandonment of their camaraderie in favor of the barbeque and all it symbolized.<sup>34</sup>

In this same interview, Talen reaffirmed his appreciation of solo performance and listed Eric Bogosian, Jackie Mason, Lily Tomlin, Whoopi Goldberg, Garrison Keillor, Spalding Gray, and Dick Shawn as actors using storytelling as the foundation of their performance pieces. He also listed a number of people (Jim Jarmusch, Susan Seielman, David Byrne, and Laurie Anderson) who told their stories through film; these performances Talen called "personal visions, . . . almost like storytelling" (Arkatov). Solo performance's most important feature, "and

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<sup>34</sup> Through writing *Cooking Harry*, Talen dealt with the loss of his Uncle Harry's friendship and resolved his resentment toward him (Arkatov).



why it's rising as its own form, . . . is that the person on stage is the source of the material. It's his life, and he wrote it," according to Talen (Arkatov). He went on to contrast solo performance to "this media era," in which the stories told in film and TV may come from any participant in the production and added, "The actor may disagree with the words coming out of his mouth. . . . We don't know who it's coming from" (Arkatov).

Admitting his inability to do stand-up comedy, which has a rhythm, an attitude, and a voice that does not come readily to him, Talen considered his best asset to be "conceiving and writing stories" (Arkatov). He saw the transition into solo performance as a move into something that came much more easily: "At some point, you make the jump from pleasing a certain number of your friends with descriptions of the world to arranging footlights around yourself and leaping on the stage" (Arkatov). He considered his work as original in that he spoke both as the source of story and as an observer of it. While the work of this period was comedic, it was not necessarily comedy.<sup>35</sup>

Talen's steady presentation of work in the theatre, together with his educational background, also led him to teaching opportunities. One of his early engagements was with a ten-week summer program in Mill

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<sup>35</sup> In the Arkatov article Talen is said to have "written from an early age but detoured earlier as a rock singer and dancer." It would be nice to have some of this background.

Valley, the Bay Area Playwright Festival and Conference.<sup>36</sup> He was also on the board of the Theatre Communications Group.<sup>37</sup>

In January, 1985, Talen performed “The Pre-Star Condition,” at the Tires Theatre, with the Dance Theatre Workshop in New York City.<sup>38</sup> A reviewer for *The New York Times* Eleanor Blau wrote that Talen’s work was known for the “unexpected imagery of his autobiographical and antic storytelling.” *The Pre-Star Condition* was a one-man show, which Blau described as “an account of his nightmare experiences auditioning in Hollywood.” It “mixes ‘hyperbolic’ memories with fantasies about wax Last Suppers and other Los Angeles phenomena” (Blau). Otis Guernsey listed *The Pre-Star Condition* in his *Best Plays of 1984-85* (409), with directors Scott Paulin and Robert Cole and lighting designer Phil Sandstorm.

Gussow was critical of the play, saying, “Though Mr. Talen seems reasonably talented as an actor, he needs to sharpen his act as a writer.” Overall, Gussow found both *Pre-Star Condition* and *American Yoga*, which

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<sup>36</sup> *The San Diego Union Tribune* listed Talen among the faculty for the event. *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. Accessed December 26, 2010, 9:00am. <<http://www.lexisnexus.com/hottopics/lnacademic>>

<sup>37</sup> W. Jones.

<sup>38</sup> This according to according to two *New York Times* reviewers, Eleanor Blau and Mel Gussow. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. Accessed December 26, 2010, 9:00am. <<http://www.lexisnexus.com/hottopics/lnacademic>>

was also presented that evening, to be insufficiently developed, calling *Pre-Star Condition* solipsistic, and implying that Talen's writing failed to speak to broader issues than his own personal struggles. Even though Gussow did not care for Talen's writing, he did credit Talen with "a certain deftness with Polo Lounge and Sunset Strip jargon." However, Gussow argued that the amusing moments he appreciated grew wearying as the performance became "over-extended" and "counter-productive."

Talen's poem, "American Yoga," was the basis for the second piece Talen performed that night with Gussow giving it a withering appraisal. In Gussow's assessment *American Yoga* was "a fuzzy-minded consideration of the impact of an automobile accident on its victim despite the piece's having been developed in a workshop with Spalding Gray, whom Gussow credits with a masterful ability to turn personal experience into "monodramatic art." Unless Talen altered the words between the poem and the performance, one of Gussow's contentions about *American Yoga* seems to be mistaken, in that he claims that it refers to an intentional act of meditation: "In mortal jeopardy...one would intuitively practice meditation. Such a dubious notion could stand further consideration." Yet the introduction to *American Yoga* belies this intentionality. It reads, in part:

You've completely lost control. . there's nothing you can do.  
You're just holding the wheel and waiting. ... It's like time  
slows down. ... It's very relaxing. It's the American Yoga.  
Rather, the claim is that "TIME...it's not there" (Talen et al.  
*Barker*).

Throughout the skit, Talen gives instances where time virtually  
stands still. For instance, smoke hangs in the air unmoving, an  
airborne body remains in the air for a very long period of time, and  
there is a long interval of eye contact in an accident that must take  
but seconds to unfold. When Talen says this is the American yoga,  
I read his words to mean that Americans do not practice  
meditation in their busy lives, and may find it shocking and novel  
when control is lost and time stands still in a traffic accident,  
implying that a peaceful disconnection from the everyday only  
occurs when Americans lose control and let events take their own  
course.

Lastly, the accident in *American Yoga* might well have been  
metaphorical, as suggested by a 1984 *New York Times* review, which  
situated it within performance pieces that used the automobile as a  
theme: "Other pieces tried to use the car more figuratively, as in a  
monologue called 'The American Yoga' by Bill Talen - a meditation on a

hit-and-run accident.”<sup>39</sup> The reviewer, however, did not elaborate, leaving the door open to a variety of interpretations of Talen’s piece.

That said, Jack Anderson of *The New York Times* also mentioned Talen’s work in his January, 1985, article, “Dance: Artists give Performance Space Benefit”: “Bill Talen, who looked like a clean-cut college student, told decidedly unfunny sick jokes about automobile crashes.” Because this was close to the same time Talen was performing *American Yoga*, and there being no record of a similar work, I assume this to be Anderson’s appraisal of the *American Yoga* skit.

Both Gussow’s and Anderson’s reviews seem somewhat off target in light of the written text, which is not “sick” and is not necessarily about meditation while in mortal danger. This inconsistency points to a possible weakness in the performance. If Gussow appreciated the writing, but is put off by the performance, and Anderson found the language of the piece offensive, it would appear that Talen was still mastering the art, language, and performance of his poetry.

In 1986, Talen, together with Ellen Sebastian and Leonard Pitt, joined with Joe Lambert to reinvent Lambert’s “People’s Theatre Coalition,” which they named “Life on the Water.” Pitt says of the theatre’s beginning, “It seemed there was a vacuum that we walked right into” ([theatrebayarea.org](http://theatrebayarea.org)). This theatre opened in Fort Mason, San

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<sup>39</sup> *The New York Times*. September 4, 1984, Tuesday, Late City Final Edition.

Francisco (theatrebayarea.org), a site that had been “[i]n use by the military for more than 200 years. By 1962, transport by air made Fort Mason obsolete, and it fell into disuse and disrepair” (Fortmason.org). In the 1970s, legislation was passed by Congress to create the first urban national park, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which includes the thirteen acres of Fort Mason Center where empty buildings were converted by the Fort Mason Foundation into a cultural center in 1976, when it was opened to the public (Fortmason.org).

In an interview with Janice Arkatov, Talen explained the name of “Life on the Water”: “It's a regional description. There's an idea that the hills of San Francisco are like bleachers overlooking the bay--and it's like a stage, with things moving across. . . . Actually, we got the name off a sign advertising condos.” The theatre was a 6,000-square-foot space, designed by architect Minoru Takeyama, who had experience in crafting stages in uncommon venues (Arkatov). The 250-seat theatre included a flexible floor plan.

Talen, Sebastian, and Pitt had been popular San Francisco artists before joining together to do their own work and to produce the work of other artists. Working as one of the artistic directors at “Life on the Water,” Talen also had the opportunity to produce his own work, promising “a play once a year. Oftentimes I was a character in the play” (Guillén). Spalding Gray, an influential solo performer, was the first

artist presented by the company and thus “established the producing/presenting organization as an important player on the scene” (theatrebythebay.org<sup>40</sup>). Gray, with whom Talen had studied at San Francisco’s Intersection Theatre, encouraged his “jump into performance,” Arkatov suggested. Travelling frequently to New York, Talen was also responsible for recruiting talent for the theatre (Arkatov).

According to Arkatov, this career choice, while a departure from his early attempts as a rock singer and dancer, was in keeping with a history of having “written from an early age.” “Life on the Water” gave Talen an opportunity to continue to write and to perform his own work as well as that of others. He collaborated on “The Shape” with Ellen Sebastian Chang, a co-founder and artistic director of “Life on the Water,” which Chang described as a “nationally and internationally known presenting and producing organization” (Kitka). <sup>41</sup>

Of his work in this company, Talen says, “Mostly I was producing other artists, but once a year I could stage a play that I wrote, and sometimes I was one of the characters in the play” (Hawthorne). During this time, Talen also started the Solo Mio Theatre, a solo performance venue and festival, and “Writers Who Act,” which worked to develop solo

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<sup>40</sup> This website is no longer online.

<sup>41</sup> I have not been able to find a copy of “The Shape.”

actors and their plays.<sup>42</sup> In 2009, Robert Avila, writing for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian Online*, described the Solo Mio Festival as “a jaw-dropping who’s who of the form—which enjoyed a real vogue as the most promising segue out of a performance art shtick everyone was getting pretty bored with.” In its first year the Solo Mio Festival drew 6,100 audience members to “Life on the Water” and the Climate Theatre, with performances by fifteen artists over a five-week period (Winn). Rosalie Sorrels performed at the Solo Mio Theatre (Idaho Public Television).

Talen thus became “a mainstay in S. F. ’s vibrant performance art scene of the 1980’s” through founding of the Solo Mio festival, as an artistic director of “Life on the Water,” and for many of his own well-received plays of which he was both writer and actor (*Harvey Reverend Billy*).

Even though, or perhaps because, “Life on the Water” was a new company, Talen, in 1987, participated in a non-fiction, historical taping for the Golden Gate National Park Association (Top80. pl). This audiotape recorded the experiences of “correctional officers and inmates who lived and worked on Alcatraz during its years as a Federal penitentiary” (“Alcatraz Cellhouse Tour”). Talen, together with Chris Tellis and Heidi Zemach, conducted the interviews. The recording was

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<sup>42</sup> I could find no information on “Writers Who Act,” such as a detailed description, how long that undertaking lasted, how long it ran, or who the participants were in the project.



made at the Antenna Theatre. The narrator was Thomas Donoghue (“Alcatraz Cellhouse Tour”).

### **The Rev. joins “Life on the Water”**

As noted earlier, while performing with “Life on the Water,” Talen’s acting drew the attention of Sidney Lanier, a theatre patron who had started his own theatre, American Theatre Place, in 1963. Lanier, was a “cousin of Tennessee Williams and subject of the work *Night of the Iguana*,” and he was also, importantly, “familiar with the re-staging of biblical narratives” (revbilly.com “Campaign Statement”). Their first meeting was significant: “A local man named Sidney Lanier started coming to my stage shows—he took me out to lunch and started arguing that there was something about my writing and delivery when I was onstage, he thought that I should try to develop ‘a new kind of American preacher’” (Hawthorne). Thus began another important relationship. Lanier was a “maverick priest,” who came to support Talen’s playhouse and continued to encourage him “to adopt the look and feel of a preacher to channel his frustrations through art” (Whitehead). In a later interview Talen recalled: “I just hated the idea. I didn’t even want to spoof Christianity. I was so traumatized by my own conservative tribe—predestination and what all” (Whitehead).

Having heard Talen’s *Black Box: 4* from 1975, I have a very clear appreciation of Lanier’s perplexing situation. Listening to Talen reading

his poetry in that 1975 recording, you can clearly hear the Reverend's voice. When Talen introduces the *Black Box* poetry project, he sounds just as he does today when he adds a high, teasing laugh to his sermon, catching the crowd's attention and affirmation. At the end of the reading of his first poem, as he speaks the last word, his voice quavers, and it is easy to imagine that quaver as the emotional voice of a preacher moved by a spiritual moment (Talen *Black Box*). It is not, therefore, mimicry that underscores Talen's televangelist style. He already possessed a strong vocal presence before Lanier convinced him to develop a strong televangelist character as a part of his act.

To persuade Talen to use his natural performance style to create a new form of preacher, Lanier had to present and persuade Talen that Jesus' work could be interpreted in ways that Talen, as a theatre artist, could appreciate. Lanier was able to see Jesus as a performer and he urged Talen "to focus on the person of Jesus and his spoken word legacy as recorded in the Gospels" (Whitehead):

[Lanier] taught me that Jesus was never a Christian. He never performed in a church or a synagogue," Talen said, "Jesus was some sort of revolutionary mystic, a great writer, a creator of these disturbing epigramic ironies that sort of explode in your head. 'Let the dead bury the dead.' You do a double take and repeat it to the person next to

you and before you know it it's a pop ditty of 2000 years ago. (Whitehead)

Lanier frequently urged Talen to embrace the televangelist alter ego which would become Talen's life's work. As Talen recalled, Lanier had become a mentor-teacher:

[A] New Yorker from the South who knew Lenny Bruce and Tennessee Williams. He would come to my plays in San Francisco and then pull out the preacherly parts and ignore the rest. He kept saying, 'We need a new kind of American preacher....' (Harvey *Reverend Billy*)

In a 1997 interview with Hawthorne, Talen recounted how Lanier began bringing books to him and taking him to see preachers at work. Of this Talen says: "I started getting interested in just the instrument as an instrument, as an invented American vocal form." In this way, Lanier worked his way through the wall that Talen had erected between an image of the Jesus with whom he had grown up, and the potential that Jesus represented on the stage.

The marriage of church and theatre was not new to Lanier. In 1960, Lanier, as pastor of St. Clement's Episcopal Church in New York, approached the Church's Bishop with the "idea of forming a marriage between Church and Theatre" (St. Clement's). Lanier proposed a number of changes to the St. Clement's mission, including offering

church services at times convenient to the theatre community, with midnight and evening services; visiting theatres, studios, and the sick in the theatre community; helping with social agency referrals; and having St. Clement's serve as the American headquarters of the English Actors Church (St. Clement's). Some of these ideas were implemented, others were not, but St. Clement's did become a local theatre venue.

At this time, St. Clement's also became the host to the "American Place Theatre," of which Tennessee Williams and Myrna Loy were founding board members (American Place Theatre). Understandably, "Mass was very ... theatrical and contained scenes from Broadway shows, poetry readings, etc. ," according to St. Clement's history (St. Clement's). Lanier's church and theatrical interests continued to merge: In 1964, "the pews and alter rail were removed, the plaster was removed from the walls, and the rafters were rigged as theatrical lighting beams" (St. Clement's). When this remodel was complete, the sanctuary had been "gutted and converted into a 150 seat Off-Broadway theatre" (St. Clement's). The first production of the American Place Theatre, Robert Lowell's "Old Glory," opened in St. Clement's. American Place Theatre and St. Clement's were active in peace marches, group exercises, experimental liturgical practices, "Environmental Baptisms and Eucharists," and "Advent Dance Masses" (St. Clement's).

So it is not surprising that Lanier could see the performance aspects of Christ's work, or that through his conversations he was able to negotiate a unique space for Jesus in Talen's life. Talen, who was already interested in solo performance, came to see Christ in that light. Of Lanier's argument, Talen said, "I had been producing [solo performance] in San Francisco. I was the traditional producer of Spalding Gray and Clair Bloom, and I had done solo shows to some degree" (Whitehead). Talen revealed, "[Lanier] made Jesus a person in the tradition of Richard Pryor, Lenny Bruce and the great monologists ... So he kind of pulled me out of my own trauma about Christianity" (Whitehead). This clarified the performative aspects of Christianity and televangelism for Talen. Nonetheless, Talen's commitment to his "Life on the Water," the development of his artistic breadth, and the exploration of expressive forms would be enough over the next few years to keep Reverend Billy in the background.

### **Growing pains**

Even with the demands of a new company, Talen still immersed himself in writing and performing in San Francisco's vibrant theatre scene. *West Coast Plays*, in 1987, lists Talen as one of "an array of writer-performers . . . working successfully in the autobiographical 'stand-up solo theatre' genre," according to Hurwitt (21). In addition to Talen, other performers included Geoff Hoyle, Pons Maar, Harriet

Schiffer, Rhodessa Jones, John Molloy, and Spalding Gray (Hurwitt 21).

“Life on the Water” presented *Beyond Detroit* at Fort Mason in Building B (fortmason.org) and commissioned the works of other artists, one of which was Suzan Lori Parks’ *The Venus Hottentot*.

“Life on the Water” offered Talen an opportunity to engage in many facets of theatre, putting him in a position to explore theatre both artistically and as a business. In the late 80s the videocassette recording performance was a popular form of entertainment. Talen changed the acts in “Life on the Water” to meet this competition, saying: “In the VCR age, selling tickets to live-performance events is tougher, especially the so-called 'serious' ticket,” said Talen. “So we’re experimenting this season with shorter runs of a wide variety of international music, monologues, plays, cabaret, performance art, along with a healthy slice of community groups and events” (Weiner “Getting”). “Life on the Water” produced a wide variety of performances, including a Texas music festival, a Black revue in the style of a '30s Harlem rent party, Indian percussionist Zakir Hussain, the ROVA Saxophone Quartet, and the Brazilian martial arts dancing of Corpo Santo (Weiner “Getting”).

“Life on the Water” also made a significant commitment to the environmental movement by producing and staging the *Eco Drama Lab*, which brought dozens of performers together to showcase not only the

environment, but to facilitate greater diversity within the movement (Ahlgren “Artists To Sing”). As a friend, Lanier supported Talen in the development of this theatre lab, which situated theatre in environmentalist discourse.<sup>43</sup> When Talen saw images of the Earth taken from the surface of the moon, he saw the Earth as if it were on stage (Ahlgren “Artists To Sing”), and he drew from that image an opportunity to place the Earth at the center of a “Life on the Water” Festival, which took place in May, 1990, and included activists, theatre professionals and American Indians from a dozen Northern California tribes (Ahlgren “Artists To Sing”). Talen described the Festival’s staging as “a snap-on planetarium: trees, a mock-up of the Sacred Peaks in the Six Rivers National Wilderness etched on the upstage wall. It’ll be a kind of American Nativity scene” (Ahlgren “Artists To Sing”).

In Talen’s interview with a reporter from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, he argued that the American stage had not caught up with the environmental movement “in terms of generating and presenting plays that deal with it” (Ahlgren “Artists To Sing”). What Talen saw onstage were attempts at environmentalist expression but added that “the artistic part isn’t there yet” (Ahlgren “Artists To Sing”). According to Ahlgren (“Artists To Sing”), what Talen and the other managers of

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<sup>43</sup> The Laniers were the first supporters of the Earthalujah Church in its nascent form, "The Earth Drama Lab" - in Fort Mason Center in San Francisco around 1990. Facebook by Rev 6/29/11

“Life on the Water” began to critique was an increasing “commercial reference to the problem.” Talen explained: “We see a lot of retailers wrapping themselves in the environmental role, with 30-second, 60-second commercials . . . This job should not be left to commercial interests” (Ahlgren “Artists To Sing”). Talen saw not only an artistic opportunity within the environmental movement, but also a need to frame the movement’s arguments before commercial interests did so (Ahlgren “Artists To Sing”). Funding for this work came from a group of local sponsors, allowing “Life on the Water” to commission plays, workshops, and other festival events. Pitt produced an Eco Rap contest, to address an issue Talen explains: “We simply have to challenge the idea that the environmental movement is a white, middle-class thing” (Ahlgren “Artists To Sing”).

The festival’s first three nights highlighted American Indian issues through “Songs Against the Go Road,” which referred to a road to be built through the Six Rivers National Forest that would impact Indian burial grounds. One member, Weiner, had this to say: “Members of tribes -- including the Hoopa, Navajo, Karuk, Yurok, Pit River, Pulik-Lah, Chimariko, Pomo, Athabaskan, Ohlone and others – [gathered] to dance, sing and discuss the Go Road” (Ahlgren “Artists To Sing”). In another event, Attorney J. Tony Serra spoke on Indian issues, *A Night*



of *Toasts and Poems*, discussing his four years of research surrounding the defense of a member of the Karuk tribe.

In November, Talen produced and performed in two new plays at “Life on the Water”, *Political Wife* and *Looking for Black Women on the Radio*, which were directed by David Ford and Kenn Watt (Weiner “Angry”). Even though Talen was well-regarded as a solo performer, each of these plays had two character roles. In a review, “Angry Young Man’s Metaphorical Ravings,” Weiner reviewed the plays for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, calling Talen “a word wizard, a metaphor monger, and a poetic nonstop talk-magician.” Weiner characterizes the male roles in both plays as being strong and media savvy on the surface, but the ostensibly weaker female characters see right through their bluster.

In *Political Wife*, Talen plays George Cudahy, an Iowa-raised presidential candidate. His wife, played by Anne Darragh, “is seated on the dias, a smile stenciled on, pretending that she’s hearing his campaign clichés for the first time” (Weiner “Angry”).<sup>44</sup> As Jane goes, so goes Cudahy, “into the wild dramaturgical ether that Talen calls home” (Weiner “Angry”). As the play progresses, Cudahy’s wife, Jane, escapes her sedation, takes the mike, and announces that she has been forced to play the “political wife” to promote her husband’s career.

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<sup>44</sup> Weiner appreciated Talen’s ability to maintain a “stump-speech style,” while taking the speech itself from “naturalistic” to “surrealistic rubbish,” suggesting that the play’s unseen political audience “sees and hears only the image, never the substance” (“Angry”).

Weiner objects to Talen's trite rage against American male politicians and support of the "long-suffering wives," yet he forgives much of the pedestrian message because of Talen's "explosive poetic metaphors," such as "all-American apple pie crawling with maggots and social bacteria" and "the script's word-chasing waywardness" ("Angry").

<sup>45</sup>Of the theme, The *San Francisco Chronicle's* theatre critic, Gerald Nachman added that all of it was "so unprovoked, unclear and, ultimately, unintelligible, you have to guess the point of it all" ("Talen Takes On"), which suggests that some might have read Talen's poetic self-indulgence as merely balderdash. Nachman allowed that there were flashes of wit, but that the "cliché-spouting politician" and "vapid plastic wife" were overdone television skits of which he had become weary. The theme is revealed in this line: "We're all political wives, waiting . . . America is over -- we had a glorious adolescence but we can't grow up . . . Imagine having morals -- is that too '60s?" ("Talen Takes On"). The idea, well worth pursuit, was according to Nachman, delivered too literally and too bluntly.

Regardless of this "waywardness," Talen's *Political Wife* proceeded through a development process that included "Life on the Water", Marin Theatre Company, Theatre for the New City in New York, Climate

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<sup>45</sup> Nachman reviewed the play at the Climate Theatre, arguing Talen skirted "the theme, using his acting gifts and mobile face -- simultaneously appealing and sneaky -- to divert us" ("Talen Takes On").

Theatre and Julia Morgan Theatre, winning the 1990 Will Glickman Award for best new play.<sup>46</sup> Other winners of this award have been Tony Kushner, Cherrie Moraga, and Philip Kan Gotanda.<sup>47</sup> In addition, Talen won the *Mother Jones Magazine's* "Hellraiser" Award and a Drama-logic Award.<sup>48</sup> In 2000, he won an Obie for his performance as Reverend Billy.<sup>49</sup>

*Looking for Black Women on the Radio*, which had premiered two years earlier and now appeared with significant revisions, pairs a TV anchorman, Mark, against his female co-anchor. The pair eventually "go bananas on-camera," Mark due to a transcendental romantic encounter, but, according to Weiner, Belinda: "no believable motivation." As with *Political Wife*, the play begins realistically and then evolves into increasingly wilder news stories, which defuses a possible parody of television's tendency to pander and instead "shifts into the poetically absurd" (Weiner). Weiner suspects that the play disintegrates toward the end due to "inelegant playwriting;" however, "the chaotic nature of the script mirrors the chaos of the outside world, and, in a sense, is in stylistic sync" ("Angry"). Throughout the review, Weiner writes of his appreciation of the language, granting it the ability to

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<sup>46</sup> "Talen Wins."

<sup>47</sup> Winn "Glickman Prize."

<sup>48</sup> This according to revbilly.com.

<sup>49</sup> Dolen.

balance other weaknesses and suggests that through the work is as yet uneven: “Right now, it's fun watching [Talen] develop his highly personal style, one that dives deep into American myth” (“Angry”).

When Talen presented *Political Wife* at the Climate Theatre, he paired it with *Heatface*, rather than with *Looking for Black Women on the Radio*. *Heatface* paired Talen, as a sports biographer, with Brian Lohman playing a washed up ex-hurler, whose life the biographer wishes to mold into a best seller. Nachman’s assessment of *Heatface* parallels his review of *Political Wife*, and, for that matter, Weiner’s reviews of *Political Wife* and *Looking for Black Women on the Radio* (Nachman, Weiner). In all three cases, the plays begin realistically and dissolve into babbling, or devolve into poetic word play, depending on how you view the text. Nachman allows that *Heatface* is a “a clever comment on media corruption and overstuffed sports heroes that, alas, gets lost halfway there” (Nachman). Yet even in the face of this criticism there is an underlying respect for the work, which both Nachman and Weiner acknowledge. Even as Nachman questions the weaknesses he sees in the script, he writes that Talen “brings something fun and manic of his own into the role of a free-lance hack coaxing a lumpy has-been jock into reliving his past. His role is the freshest and most real, more than real symbol” (Nachman).

While artistically, “Life on the Water” provided Talen with a venue for his work and allowed him to make bold artistic choices, it also created a conduit between himself and other artists. He had an opportunity to meet Allen Ginsberg again, but this time on Talen’s turf. Waiting outside of the Town Hall Theatre, in Lafayette, California, he asked Ginsberg if he would allow Talen to produce him at the Cowell Theatre in Fort Mason. Ginsberg agreed, and this gave them the opportunity to get to know each other and to talk about their earlier encounter in the New York. Talen recalls that by this time he was feeling quite proud of his recitation of *Howl* at St. Marks—that he “tried to do such a grand theft in [Ginsberg’s] home church.”<sup>50</sup> Talen says that Allen spoke of it with amusement: [Ginsberg] did feel sorry for my clumsy ambition back in ‘76, he said he was afraid for me. Thought I needed to meditate more.”<sup>51</sup>

The success of “Life on the Water”s’ 1990 Solo Mio festival heightened interest in the genre, and by early 1991 the Climate Theatre, the Marsh Theatre, the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, and Theatre on the Square were showcasing solo performance pieces (Winn “They Do It”). Sara Felder, when performing at The Marsh, told her audience, “Our raison d’être is to bridge the gap [between audience and performer]”

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<sup>50</sup> Facebook message from Bill Talen, 2/5/2011.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

(Winn “They Do It”). Steven Winn, of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, wrote, “a theatrical phenomenon is booming...a new generation of self-sufficient performers is commanding an ever-increasing share of stage space and attention” (“They Do It”). Centered on personal history and memoir, the performances included John O’Keefe’s performance of his memoir, *Vid*; Rick Reynold’s personal history, *Only the Truth is Funny*; Josh Kornbluth’s rotating two shows, Josh Kornbruth’s *Daily World* and *Haiku Tunnel*; and Ruven Hannah’s trilogy of solo pieces (Winn “They Do It”). The Marsh theatre’s stage was busy every night of the week with solo performers testing rough new sketches and producing finished pieces (Winn “They Do It”).

In Winn’s analysis, the rise of the solo performances “may have [had] as much to do with the need for an economically efficient form of theatre in tough times as they do in refining a particular aesthetic.” Regardless of the motivation, however, “the manifestation of the solo performance movement form(ed) a rich spectrum of expressive impact and style,” wrote Winn, citing other “marquee-name” practitioners, such as “the dry –witted ironic performer, Spalding Gray, Eric Bogosian, with his frenzied splatters *Drinking in America* and *Sex, Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll*, and Whoopi Goldberg’s comedic, but poignant characters” (“They Do It”).

Performance in the Bay Area was typically cross-disciplinary, and Winn noted the blending of “everything from circus skills to conventional stand-up comedy with narrative and dramatic techniques.” Geoff Holye infused his performances with clowning and physical comedy; Felder juggled bagels and croissants which epitomized her New York Jewish past and California present; Leonard Pitt incorporated mime; Brenda Wong Aoki worked Asiatic dance into her routine; and crossover stand-up comic Rick Reynolds performed his work, *Only the Truth is Funny* (Winn “They Do It”).

These works were uniquely autobiographical, including Talen’s early 1991 piece called *Belief*, which was a solo performance about solo performance. The name of the play speaks to the ability of solo performance to speak directly to the audience in ways that are not possible in more strongly mediated performances, as Talen explained:

I think people are confused about the authorship of the stories we get on film and TV. Who, exactly, is telling us this, and what's really being said? The solo performer offers the directness that comes from seeing and hearing the person who's lived that life, that story. The performance -- the gestures, the facial movements -- it's all integral and inseparable. The completeness of the loop is a big part of the drama. (Winn “They Do It”)

David Ford directed Talen and others in solo performance and explained that the key was to interpret the person, rather than a script (Winn “They Do It”): “The material is so close to people that they tend to come at it intuitively, without always being aware of the themes they're dealing with, which might explain some of the difficulty that critics noted in Talen’s two-role plays of the previous year. The themes were teasingly close to immediate expression, but remained hidden behind his wayward poetics.”<sup>52</sup>

Ford’s method as director of an ensemble piece is to work with the individuals and to rely in part on some chemistry to work through the composition, but the solo performer has a much more personal connection to his, or her, art (Winn “They Do It”). The solo performer and his director creates an interchange between performer and audience, with the director focusing on diction, delivery, carriage, movement, stage space, and technical elements (Winn “They Do It”). Joe Lambert, also of “Life on the Water”, offered the example of the relationship between performer and the fourth wall. In solo performance, Lambert says, “It’s all about immediate identification” (Winn “They Do It”). The concept of a

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<sup>52</sup> While Ford wrote that some performers began with improvisation, Talen’s approach was different: “Talen tends to write a text, complete with poetry-like line breaks, before he begins working onstage” (Winn “They Do It”).



fourth wall is a hindrance which must immediately be broken by the performer (Winn "They Do It").

Some in the audience saw opportunities to participate themselves in the solo performer movement. Talen's workshop "Writers Who Act" drew a broad mix of students including those who hoped to make a career on the stage, as well as dabblers, which included teachers, stockbrokers, and stay-at-home mothers (Winn "They Do It"). While each may not have made solo performance a career choice, Talen appreciated the stories they had to tell. Perhaps there was not enough material for a career, yet "they've all got at least one story to tell, a story that really matters" (Winn "They Do It").

All of this interest in solo performance created a "one-man show population explosion," (Nachman "One-Man Show") which provided a gateway to stardom for some, and an opportunity for self-expression for others. Using humor and a bit of sarcasm, Nachman reviewed several San Francisco theatres, implicating the difficult economic times of the early 1990s in creating an environment that made solo performance almost necessary. Nachman cited six one-character shows that were presented immediately following the Solo/Mio Festival's two months of one-person shows. In addition to Talen's "Political Wife" and "Heat," each of which had another actor in addition to Talen, John O'Keefe, presented two one-man shows, and Paul E. Richards and his wife

wrote, directed, and starred in *Love Match* (Nachman “One-Man Show”). There must have been a “windfall donation” for *Slow Dance on the Killing Ground*, as Nachman exclaimed that it had “three – count ‘em, three! – entire actors” (“One-Man Show”). Of *Party of One*, Nachman was even more enthusiastic, claiming that it featured a “veritable cast of thousands – four entire performers, an increase of 300 percent over the average local show, with *Harry Who?* boasting “four singers plus an onstage pianist, almost qualifying as a crowd scene” (“One-Man Show”). He also counted one character, Betty, as being tall enough to qualify as perhaps two performers. In trying to assess the presence of these performers, he wondered about the cause. “I’m well aware these are hard times but I’ve begun to worry if perhaps actors are gently being phased out of local theatre,” Nachman said, adding, “Before going to ACT’s *Hamlet* I half-wondered if I might literally only see Hamlet [and] ...was delighted to see the entire cast again, with Laertes and everything.” He went on to suggest that rather than wasting an entire stage on one actor, the audience could simply go to the actor’s home, or the house could be divided into a multiplex with several one act shows running concurrently.

If solo performance was a way of stretching the theatrical budget, then taping those performances allowed actors to stretch their performance exposure. Talen explored this possibility by filming his

performances for distribution, participating in the Mill Valley Film Festival and by advocating for the arts on television. He contributed a tape, called “Bill Talen” to Joanne Kelly’s New American Makers, a nonprofit organization devoted to the distribution of the work of video artists, which she would anthologize for film and television networks.<sup>53</sup>

With the popularity of the VCR, there were opportunities to expand beyond traditional video borders. In 1991, Kelly assembled a collection of works that she considered to be “diverse personal visions wrapped in equally diverse cultural, geographic and economic perspectives” (Stanley). A reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, John Stanley, described Talen’s work, in Kelly’s series, as taking “on the absurdity of Senator Klaghorn from the old Fred Allen radio show.” Talen’s exposure to, and appreciation of, this type of work opened the door to his participation in the emerging field of video.

At about the same time, the Mill Valley Film Festival, then in its eleventh year, produced a video folio of local performers, *Brave New Talent*, which featured Talen, Rinde Eckert, Pamela Z, Josh Brody and others.<sup>54</sup> The Festival also featured several documentaries including Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied*, a documentary about black homosexual relationships; *Color Adjustment*, which explored the influence of

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<sup>53</sup> Stanley.

<sup>54</sup> Ahlgren “Mill Valley Fest.”

television on America's racial strife; a film by Evgueni Tsymbal, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon*, which tackled subjects that were controversial in Tsymbal's homeland, the Soviet Union; and other works including the documentary, *John Cipollina: Electric Guitarslinger*.

Talen believed that video art was also a good match for television. With that in mind he attended a forum at a local television station, KQED, arguing that the station did not offer opportunities to local theatre actors, nor did it offer sufficient documentaries.<sup>55</sup>

San Francisco's Fogtown Network offered an opportunity for Talen to further develop his Reverend Billy character through video and televangelist experiments, in 1993.<sup>56</sup> On Fogtown's first live show, Talen brought a nascent Reverend Billy to the podium. Apfogtown, an internet pseudonym, uploaded a video of the show, saying that performance artist Bill Talen worked unscripted in this work that "recalls Andy Kaufman (Foreign Man) and predates Sacha Baron Cohen (Borat)" (apfogtown). The video shows a promising portrayal of Bill Talen and the Reverend in a state of transition. Talen's costume is a business suit, white shirt, and tie. Many of the hand gestures and facial expressions that will become emblematic of Reverend Billy can be seen in this fiery defense of Christmas—although some gestures look as

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<sup>55</sup> Stack.

<sup>56</sup> apfogtown.

though they have been stolen from newsreels of Adolph Hitler. The preacher is a confident, pleading, and righteous lectern-beater. His sermon made a visible impact on the “trembling teen hula dancers poised on the next stage and their dumfounded parents in the audience” (apfogtown). A closing twist in this performance has the Reverend taking a cell phone call in which he negotiates the buying and selling of assets with his stockbroker. This conclusion indicates that Talen was experimenting with the Reverend as a critique of the televangelist, and not simply assuming a guise that would negotiate space between audience and message.<sup>57</sup> This mocking of the televangelist would eventually be discarded as Talen came to appreciate the faux preacher’s ability to carry a message.

Talen revisited George Cudahy’s campaign in his play *Just Desserts with George and Jane*, later renaming it *Apple Pie with George and Jane*, which he wrote and performed, with Anne Darragh again playing Jane Cudahy. The reprised version changed the venue from theatre to public space, sped up the timing, and introduced audience interaction, which played out as a campaign stop with “apple pie, coffee and frantic supporting cast, who work the room like polished (as in oily) pros” (Nachman “Audience”). Now styled as an interactive comedy, this

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<sup>57</sup> This conclusion indicates that Talen was experimenting with the Reverend as a critique of the televangelist, and not simply assuming a guise that would negotiate space between audience and message.

play critiqued the American elective process. Talen described *Apple Pie* and his role with enthusiasm:

One of the characters went out into public space. He was a presidential candidate named George and part of an interactive play [staged] in hotel banquet rooms. It was a corrupt political dinner and each table was a surreal special interest group. [I]t was an exaggeration of what was becoming rampant at the time. I had a spin doctor whispering in my ear. Another spin doctor whispering in the spin doctor's ear and so forth and so on, like a barbershop mirror into the distance. (Guillén)

The public space George Cudahy entered was on the campaign trail in New Hampshire in rented ballrooms, mimicking the campaigns of actual presidential candidates. In all, Talen and director David Ford booked fifteen performances in New Hampshire, with some at the Ramada Inn in Concord and others at the Granite Street Bar and Grill in Manchester (Clayton).

When interviewed for the *Union Leader* in Manchester, Talen challenged the depiction of George Cudahy as fiction, claiming “almost all of the candidates are fictional characters, self-invented creatures of the media age” (Clayton). “It’s true,’ he said, ‘All of the Elvis impersonators are in Las Vegas and all of the John Kennedy impersonators are in New Hampshire running for President’” (Clayton).

The filmed version of this performance premiered at the Berkeley Museum of Art & Pacific Film Archive, whose program placed the film in the company of “[m]any artists [who] have entered the political arena not to gain power but to rupture the sanctity of the two-party system” (Seid). These artists included Jello Biafra, Lowell Darling, Wavy Gravy, Pat Paulsen, Randy of the Redwoods, R U. Sirius, and Zippy the Pinhead. The reviewer, Steve Seid, recalled the work of performance artist Lowell Darling who ran against Jerry Brown in the governor’s race, winning 60,000 votes, on a platform that included designating areas of the state as “No Smoking.” The campaigns of Wavy Gravy—“Nobody for President”—and Pat Paulsen ran for many years with Wavy Gravy’s beginning in 1976 and Paulson’s in 1968 against Richard Nixon.

Even though originally reviewers did not mention Cudahy’s likeness to William Jefferson Clinton in their earlier reviews of *Political Wife*, reviewers recognized a number of similarities. Winn, with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, recognized the change in Cudahy’s character, asking: “Was it just our imagination, or did the protean Talen begin looking and sounding more and more like that other Bill -- the one soon to add 'president' to his name -- by the end of this change-filled theatrical year?”<sup>58</sup> Soon the transformation was complete: Seid called Cudahy a “Clinton-clone with a penchant for pandering and a knack for

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<sup>58</sup> “Stage Candidates.”

hyperbole.” Talen captured both tendencies effectively in Cudahy’s line: “I want to extend full credit-card privileges to fetal America” (Seid).

When Nachman reviewed “Apple Pie” for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, he was much more enthusiastic. He termed the show itself “an intermittently inspired exercise in theater-verité ” (Nachman “One-Man Show”). Where he found the motivations in *Political Wife* unintelligible, he approved of this version of Talen’s Cudahy, appreciating Cudahy’s “peaking at just the right moment” (Nachman “One-Man Show”). While appreciating that Cudahy could win the California primary if properly outfitted with position papers and an 800 number, Nachman added, “Talen is born to the part with his toothy coast-to-coast grin, pink glow, sparkly eyes, clean cut features and terrific hair – a Clinton clone if ever there was one” (“One-Man Show”). Talen’s mimicry took him beyond being a political look-alike. His “ability to mimic the tone, attitude, aura of self-satisfied well-being, cliché-ridden style and flourishes of empty oratory, are as close to the ‘real’ thing as the Constitution allows” (Nachman “One-Man Show”). When Talen’s Cudahy spoke, he had “the ring, the sincere timbre, of candidatespeak that sounds like Henry Fonda as a yuppie Abe Lincoln, with all the pauses, cadences and a funny way of sticking out his jaw when he means business and then tucking it back in for a meaningful anecdote to indicate humility” (Nachman “One-Man Show”).



Flag-covered round tables filled the ballroom. Audience members joined PACs by virtue of their seating and were “worked” by cast members playing glad-handing Cudahy supporters and PAC contributors such as “Buddhists Against Taxes,” “Marina Owners for Wetlands Reform,” and “Wives of Foreign Wars of Northern California” (Nachman “One-Man Show”).

Still, Nachman criticized Jane Cudahy’s transition from a “believable ... well-turned-out helpmate with her frozen smile “part Jackie, part Nancy, part Kitty” into an “out of sync” loony as too sharp a twist in character. In his view, the show lost focus at that point, lacking director David Ford’s precision and faltering into “desperate ... schtick,” with the show’s message (“We’re all political wives!”) killing the comedic excitement: “You wander away wishing the Talen campaign staff had found a more subtly satirical way to exit; it doesn’t need a zany finish...”(Nachman “One-Man Show”).

The text of the play is filled with one-liners, metaphors, and heart tugs: “We’re a plane headed down the tarmac –are you on board?”; “She’s been hugging Irish kids with leukemia in the sunset”; “I’ve never been to Washington, D. C. , I don’t even know where it is and I pledge to you tonight, I will never get there!”; “I was just a tow-headed youngster in Plattville, Wiscosin, saving for apple pie” (Nachman “One-Man Show”). Politically, Cudahy reaches for anything that appeals: he served in Nam—

Nam, South Dakota; he wants to turn steeples into missiles; animals should be given the vote; the Earth should have some clout; [and] he will teach West Palm Beach orphans to sail” (Nachman “One-Man Show).

Talen apparently took Nachman’s critique to heart, restructuring the character of Jane Cudahy and much of the second half of the play for a new run at the Richelieu, starting in June 1992. Reviewer Mick LaSalle also of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, noted that “the play retain[ed] all of its quirky charm while gaining a dimension of sophistication that brings it to a whole other level” (“New Apples”). Lorri Holt now played Jane Cudahy, and the role was updated to reflect a “Hilary Clinton” -type wife who was “smarter than and just as ambitious as her husband” (LaSalle “New Apples”). When Cudahy comes unstuck as the play concludes, it is because she sees her husband betraying the political aims that originally brought him into the race, “thereby solving the motivational issues that plagued previous scripts” (LaSalle “New Apples”). Jane Cudahy’s pain is now an important political message; she says that “the campaign has corrupted her to the point where she not only ducks the hard questions but has forgotten what her real opinions are” (LaSalle “New Apples”).

While still maintaining his Clintonesque style, the new Cudahy showed flashes of a variety of other candidates (LaSalle “New Apples”), his look “reminiscent of Hart-Clinton-Kerrey-Gore or any one of the

Kennedys.” In Cudahy’s stump speech delivery, LaSalle found much of Tom Harkins’ cadence. In his rounds of the PAC tables, Cudahy would shake hands with each member and explain how his interests were a perfect match to theirs. Watching this, LaSalle observed a bit of chill in the room, as even though the speeches were comic, the scene had become too familiar for comfort. “This is, indeed, how campaigns are financed in America. With more force than any abstract warning coming in over a TV screen, Talen shows how impossible it is for a political candidate to leave such a room without being compromised,” wrote LaSalle.

When the 1994 Solo Mio Festival opened in September, “Life on the Water” partnered with The Climate Theatre’s directors Joegh Bullock and Marcia Crosby, with Tom Ross as producer and Boyd as lighting and set designer (Whiting “Solo Mio”). The previous year’s festival had drawn a large audience, selling 14,000 tickets, and with actors such as Danny Glover, Spalding Gray, and Josh Kornbluth presenting their work.

Talen responded to the accusation of Ellen Gavins, of Brava! For Women in the Arts, that the Festival was a sanctuary for white, heterosexual males, by categorizing the performers under the headings “Women,” “Jewish,” “Latino,” “Gay and Lesbian,” and “African-American” (J. Green). Again, the Festival included Talen’s Writers Who Act apprentice performance artists in their first shows; they were featured at

The Climate Theatre (J. Green). Talen's "Apple Pie with George and Jane" was also a part of the line-up.

The eclectic collection of headliners for the Festival were the "last of the big-breath, beautiful talkers," Talen said (Whiting "Giving Bloom"). He bookended the Festival with veteran Shakespearean actor Claire Bloom and Allen Ginsberg, saying, "She and Allen come from different ends of the language" (Whiting "Giving Bloom") Neither Bloom nor Ginsberg were the first names Talen sought for the Festival that year. When he saw John Trudell perform his *Alcatraz* show in New York, Talen imagined the piece would be powerfully underscored if it were performed within view of Alcatraz, and he arranged for it to be performed in San Francisco. Trudell's work spoke of the American Indian movement's effort to reclaim Alcatraz, and performing it in San Francisco served as a poignant reminder of the cause. Another piece that caught Talen's attention was a work-in-progress on Sir Issac Newton. This assemblage of performers created a thematic, historical undercurrent for the Festival program (Whiting "Solo Mio"). Ginsberg's work, which Talen first saw during a "beatnik night" at the Town Hall in New York three months earlier, completed Talen's historic mélange. "Angst and energy is pouring out of [Ginsberg] and it takes you right out of your cares and worries," Talen recalled in an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*; "He's the

great spellbinder" (Whiting). Talen waited at the stage door and pitched the Solo Mio Festival as Ginsberg hailed a cab.

The Solo Mio Festival remained strong after Talen's move to New York, having become a San Francisco tradition. The following year *Variety's* review claimed that San Francisco's self absorption had fostered the city's most influential current theatrical genre, in which "the solo performer reigns supreme" (Harvey "By the Golden Gate"). Harvey acknowledged the support of the San Francisco patrons, and theatre houses for the solo performance genre from its 1980s heyday, through changes in theatrical fashion, with the smaller houses supporting and being supported by them, and still, or finally, with the larger houses openly accepting solo performers ("By the Golden Gate"). "[T]he locus of this movement is the Solo Mio Festival, founded in 1990 by Climate Theater's Joegh Bulluck and ... Life on the Water's Bill Talen" (Harvey "By the Golden Gate"). In 1993, "Life on the Water" closed. As Pitt explained, "We originated the theatre as artists to do our own work. . . . We found running a theatre is a real business, and you can't do your work as much as you want to" (Schiffman).

After leaving "Life on the Water", Talen worked through other venues, one of which was at the Climate Theatre, in 1993 and 1994, where he became co-artistic director with Joegh Bullock (Winn "Duke Made"). Talen's other projects, such as the Earth Drama Lab and

Writers Who Act workshops, were also moved to the Climate. Working as a director at both the Climate and Bayfront theatres, he brought Andrew O’Hehir’s play *Cousin Martin*, a “smoldering portrait of an Irish family,”<sup>59</sup> to The Climate Theatre, in 1993. A first play by O’Hehir, an editor on the *San Francisco Weekly*, it told the tale of a Dublin Catholic family with a secret that is uncovered by a visiting American relative, creating a “stifling caldron of familial and national unease” (Winn “Smoldering Portrait”). Kate Boyd designed the costumes, lighting, and set; Shelby Gaines created the sound design; and Gemma Whelan was the dialect coach (Guernsey 574; Harvey “Cousin Martin”). Talen cast the play with eight actors, three of whom were well-known in the area: Dennis Matthews, Stephanie Hunt, and Joel Mullenix (Winn “Some New Little Theaters”). Guernsey and Jeffrey Sweet listed *Cousin Martin* in *Best Plays of 1993-1994* (574).

*Variety*’s Dennis Harvey reviewed *Cousin Martin* and was less than complimentary: “Director Bill Talen and designer Kate Boyd, working on a slim budget, haven't created much excitement in their staging. Hunt's horny Fionnuala and Colley's wedding-shy Paul contribute especially welcome notes of comic relief” (Harvey “Cousin Martin.”). The play was “an archetypal Irish play whose retro feel is heightened by adherence to another era’s recipe for drama,” the “well-made play” (Harvey “Cousin

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<sup>59</sup> Winn “Smoldering Portrait.”

Martin.”). Nonetheless, when *Cousin Martin* was presented at The Bayfront Theatre in April, 1994, Winn was enthusiastic and described the play as “splendidly directed by Bill Talen and potently performed,” by the cast (“Smoldering Portrait”). *Cousin Martin* is an impressively engineered trip through a mine field,” Winn added. It may well be that Talen’s ear for the aural was an excellent match for the play:

The cast, under Talen's keen direction, tears into the dialogue with spontaneously combustible feelings and attentive nuances. Aside from a few slips, the Dublin accents -- and the trace of a brogue in Mullennix's flatland American cadence -- have a musical accuracy. (Winn “Smoldering Portrait”)

The closing of “Life on the Water”, however, ended Talen’s San Francisco career, which had long been influenced by the New York theatre scene, and he now became permanently rooted on the East Coast. As Talen explained it, “The Reverend Billy project actually started in San Francisco but it figured itself out in Times Square” (Guillén).

## CHAPTER III

### BECOMING REVEREND BILLY

#### **Times Square**

When Bill Talen moved to New York, both Talen and the City were in transition. Jayson Whitehead described Talen at this time as “an out-of-work artist/playwright” (Whitehead), who arrived in Times Square, which was undergoing “massive redevelopment ... led by the Walt Disney Company ... Gone were the sex shops, prostitutes, drug dealers, and run-down theatre district. A Disney Store and a refurbished theatre with *The Lion King* as its centerpiece had taken their place” (Whitehead).

Talen’s love of theatre heightened his awareness of the changes in Times Square. As an actor, playwright, and theatre owner, he was alarmed by Disney’s usurpation of Broadway’s theatrical space. Later recalling his reaction to this change he said, “Being a theater person coming to Broadway, I think I’m coming to the Mecca ... [Instead, it’s ] Las Vegas now, it’s gone. No one goes there and culture doesn’t happen there” (Whitehead). Further, he recognized that this change was proceeding in concert with the new mayor Rudy Giuliani’s effort to “‘clean-up’ the streets of New York” (Whitehead). To the extent that Broadway was “Disneyfied,” Talen saw the neighborhoods and people likewise “cleaned” up:



It was very upsetting to see Giuliani's cops picking up anybody who didn't seem to have a credit card. ... Any person of color that didn't look absolutely middle-class, that didn't look precisely like they would spend money in the next five minutes was swept out. And all the small vendors, the traditional characters—boom, out of there. (Whitehead)

Jason Grote wrote in the *Cultural Resistance Reader* that Reverend Billy is, in part, a product of Giuliani's efforts:

By the mid-1990s, the Giuliani administration, the Disney Company, and various other consortia had more or less successfully purged the neighborhood of crazies and other undesirables. In their place stood a new kind of preacher, one who, authenticity-wise, is to the religious nuts as Disney is to the neighborhood: Reverend Billy. (362)

In Grote's view, Giuliani's "clean-up" efforts garnered him a new form of resistance. In particular, Talen's no longer had to struggle to have his voice heard over the din of "crazies," and could now be heard more clearly. Dunscome added, "Disney created an ersatz Times Square to replace the sleaze, so they end up with an ersatz street preacher to rant at them" (Grote 362). Further, Talen developed his initial anti-consumerism message out of these intersections: his own theatrical background and

interests, the transfer of Broadway into Disney's hands, and the destruction of the social fabric of the neighborhoods. As he noted, "it was like the neighborhood got bleached" (Whitehead), and that bleaching informed his budding ideology: "That was the nature of my theology...Don't support this. Stop shopping. And that's where it started—the destruction of Times Square" (Whitehead). In this milieu, the "Reverend Billy Project" began to "figure itself out."

Talen made his new home in New York with the American Place Theatre in Lanier's St. Clement's Church. Lanier must have been very pleased that his mentorship had brought Talen so far and placed Reverend Billy in front of the Times Square Disney. With the Church and Theatre as his base, Talen began a year of long days of intense actor training in Times Square as he learned to grab the attention of passersby, transforming them into a receptive audience. This effort was financially supported by Lanier, allowing Talen to develop Reverend Billy's street persona without financial pressures.<sup>60</sup>

It is difficult to picture Talen in Times Square challenging Disney. On the one hand, standing at a podium in Times Square preaching against the Mouse would make most people uncomfortable. On the other, I imagine that the presence of so many other preachers in Times Square would have lessened Talen's discomfort. In Richard Sandler's

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<sup>60</sup> See interview with Bill Talen in the Appendix.

film, *The Gods of Times Square*, Talen is shown carrying a large Mickey Mouse under his arm while preaching, “People...Listen to me! Mickey Mouse is the anti-Christ. This is the devil and the Disney Store is turning Manhattan into a theme park!” (*Gods of Times Square*). Such an extreme, personal performance might make the performer quake as he performed solo in a public space before an unaware, and largely uncaring, audience. However as Sandler’s film shows, Talen brought Reverend Billy to life amidst a loud, raucous, and committed group of preachers, each of whom claimed a unique understanding of the way of God and attributed to Him some radical social message or other. The preachers presented a variety of theologies in every voice from rant to sing song, to prose, to rap. Reverend Billy shared the stage with them. They were, writes Agger, “vanishing originals, like James, a bearded cleric who answers every question with one of his own, and Jim, a sallow Englishman who reveals himself to be Jesus Christ...” (Agger). Prominent in the film are the striking contradictions of Times Square: multi-story billboards, advertisements showcasing perfect white bodies, and the message of consumerism which frames the interviews, the preachers, the shoppers, and the tourists.

In Time Square’s crowd of similar highly vocal and visual performance preachers, Talen’s bold message would not have appeared unusual or radical. In fact, in Sandler’s film, Talen and his message are

not an important focus because Times Square had long been a public stage for just such performers. Talen's anti-consumerist message might have been new to the Square, but it was not so radical as to cause alarm. I see Times Square as the perfect experimental theatre space to hone Reverend Billy's visual and vocal talents. Talen does emerge as a breath of fresh air in the film; his message is more coherent, and his stage presence is more commanding than that of the other street preachers. He remained, however, a part of the crowd, not separate from it—not yet so distinct that he could dominate with his message. Also, in the film, Talen notes that, because the economy was booming with no sign of slowing, it was easy to poke fun at consumerism in the '90s (*Gods of Times Square*), implying that the reduced circumstances of many people in 2007 made it difficult for Talen to tease his audience and have them enjoy the guilty pleasure of the joke.

In terms of visual impact, Talen described his work in Times Square as needing to be such that it would "catch the eye." His height, 6 foot 3 inches tall, and his combed-back pompadour, made it easy for him to stand out in a crowd. His white tuxedo jacket added a note of decorum, contrasting with the riot of images in Times Square. Around his neck he wore a priest's collar, and he stood before a pulpit and preached. The tall white male, neatly attired, with a bombastic style and presentation, was impossible to ignore. I do not imagine that Talen's

presentation convinced many that he was a conventional preacher, but images touch memory and memory provokes emotion—even trust. Bill Talen, presenting Reverend Billy, presented a bold swirl of evocative images and cultural conversation even before he spoke.

Whitehead argued that Talen presented “a mixed bunch of metaphors. It’s part televangelist, part Episcopal priest. ... Then there is his animated, resounding voice.” The musical nature of his voice Talen attributes to Lanier’s schooling: “Lanier taught me to listen to a voice so that every spoken word is a note and sometimes many notes as if they’re alighted on a musical scale. ... A good preacher hears the spoken word that way” (Whitehead). Talen also quotes Louis Armstrong’s description of preachers: “They ‘work in the landscape between talking and singing’” (Whitehead), which is reminiscent of Rosalie Sorrels’s singing-talking that underlies Talen’s awareness of the landscape the two share. With these two important mentors, and Louis Armstrong’s stress on the importance of the transitional space between talking and singing, Talen had developed a keen appreciation of the vocal work required to endow Reverend Billy with the power to “catch the ear,” as well as the eye. Along with voice and imagery, his performance required a script to embody his artistic aesthetic and social ethic. Long accustomed to drawing on personal experience and the political landscape for solo performance, Talen’s Times Square performances began to utilize social

issues affecting his own neighborhood to energize his performances.

There were powerful forces shaping Talen's New York, and he chose to confront them by weaving his anti-consumerist message into his work, which initially focused on the Disney Store in Times Square. To oppose "the Disneyfication of the neighborhood, he set up his portable pulpit at the door of the Mouse" (revbilly.com "About Us"). This led to the power confrontation inside the Disney Store, his arrest, and his budding appreciation of the theatricality of retail space.

Talen's assault on the Mouse inside the Times Square Disney Store was the first of many retail interventions, and the four-foot-tall Mickey would become part of his early Reverend Billy performances on the world stage. His in-store performances converted customers into an audience and challenged them to question their everyday choices. For the first few years, Talen's large, plush Mickey would often be seen in his company, becoming a prop in his act, allowing Talen to appropriate some of the universal power that Disney had so carefully packed into Mickey Mouse. Talen capitalized on Mickey's physical manifestation, including his smile, shape, and costume, and through it the cherished, communal memories of his audience, the site in which childhood cartoons are stored, and in which the sound of uninhibited childhood laughter resides. Even though Talen wanted to destroy the hold that Mickey had on his audience, so besotted were they with the Disney myth that Talen had to wave Mickey

before their eyes to get their attention, using the power of Mickey to catch his audience with their guard down and the door to their youthful imagination wide open. Through that door, Talen broadcast his message of a new way of life, one in which neighborhoods belong to the people who live there and should be the residents' unique creation.<sup>61</sup> Some would see, at that critical moment, that Mickey was synthetic<sup>62</sup> in every sense of the word, and that the memories he generated were likewise artificial. Some might have seen that the artificiality had supplanted other childhood possibilities and that if Disney were not stopped their synthetic Mouse would consume other memories, lands, and futures. Talen must have recognized the increased energy he tapped when he held Mickey aloft, as a dangerous alchemy between Talen and the Mouse

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<sup>61</sup> Before Guillian, and before Disney, the Times Square neighborhood was seedy and run down. It was home to many bars and strip clubs. Many people would have felt uncomfortable walking in the neighborhood at night. Because of this, Reverend Billy's argument with Disney over the proper use of that space is problematic. I have come to believe that Reverend Billy's confrontation with Disney was more about the insidious nature of the "identical details" of franchises and transnational corporations, than it was about the quality of Times Square as it existed prior to its being altered by Disney and Guillian's clean-up campaign. Talen would prefer to have the "seedy" details, regardless of who may or may not profit by them, than the "identical details," which he believes robs contemporary life of much of its unique charms and dangers.

<sup>62</sup> Since all of social life is constructed, the level to which any aspect of it can be more, or less, synthetic, or authentic is impossible to assess. I believe that Talen sees the creation of large numbers of products and places, built through the marketing of "identical details" as less "authentic" than those that arise locally, or in unique numbers by individual imagination, rather than corporate design.

developed whenever they took the stage together. This Mickey, this copy of a copy of a copy, Talen's prize, was seditious.

### **The contest for neighborhood**

The Disney Store on Times Square was the scene of the beginning of Talen's work as a "Retail Interventionist." His initial incursion into the Times Square Disney Store broke the "fourth wall" not only between actor and audience, but also between consumer and retailer. Like the rules for attending a theatrical performance, there were rules for interacting with a retailer's presentation, including rules outlining interactions with the sales personnel. With these tools, he began his theatrical contest with the theatre of consumption, which consumes space for its performances, resources, authentic memory, and neighborhoods (Talen *WSID* xiii).

This "theatre of consumption," which Talen encountered inside the Disney Store, can be seen in terms of Guy DeBord's *Society of Spectacle*. In this 1967 work, Debord described a change in social structure that prioritized representation over the real. DeBord recognized that "spectacle" went beyond images. Rather the spectacle "is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (7). Further, the spectacle was "both the result and the goal of the dominant mode of production" (DeBord 8). Further, because the spectacle manifests itself in every form of communication, from news to propaganda to



advertising to entertainment, “the spectacle represents the dominant *model* or life,” affirming the choices made during the production process and “in the consumption implied by that production” (DeBord 8, italics in the original). DeBord also recognized the overwhelming nature of a society based on such spectacle, which constantly justifies the dominant mode of production and “monopolizes the majority of time spent outside the production process” (8).

For Talen, the loss of neighborhood was a personal loss, because the malls, the chain stores, and the franchised boutiques were replacing his community. DeBord would have referred to this as the colonization of social life (21), arguing that in industrially advanced regions, “social space is blanketed by ever-new layers of commodities,” much as Starbucks and other chains had come to blanket much of Talen’s New York (21). Of the ubiquitous Starbucks, Talen said, “We dub them ‘attack cafes.’ Even they call it cannibalizing the neighborhood, as Naomi Klein reports in *No Logo*” (WSID 5). Starbucks could afford to place a café in a neighborhood and support it with its global network of cafes even if a particular unit lost money. Thus, Starbucks could wage a war of attrition on the neighborhood cafes so that local men and women would face financial loss if they continued to run their businesses. By this method, Starbucks laid siege to a neighborhood until it fell under their control. With each successful café, a piece of the neighborhood fell into

homogeneous, compliant consumerism, ever adding to the society of spectacle.

Talen described his own neighborhood: “We are walking up our main street, which is Lafayette, up a canyon of horny looking supermodels. Some of them are only six feet tall and in the flesh, some of them are ten stories and draped down the sides of buildings” (*WSID* 7). The scale of these supermodel images is breathtaking, even when viewed only from the pages of Talen’s writing. With a strategic incursion of spectacular graphics, airbrushed images, franchised boutiques, and box stores, the land that was Talen’s New York City was eroded. Talen compared this new city to a “no man’s land,” not unlike Walter Benjamin’s description of World War I’s desolate landscapes in which only the clouds in the sky served as a connection to the real earth. After the Giuliani’s urban renewal, Talen’s home neighborhoods were prominently populated with hyperreal images demanding immediate and excessive consumption (Talen *WSID* 31-34).

DeBord warned of corrosive dullness that was spawned with capitalist industrialization almost forty years earlier: “Capitalist production has unified space, breaking down the boundaries between one society and the next” (94). He called this process banalization (94). Further, he saw that the accumulation of commodities mass-produced for the abstract spaces of the market “undermined the autonomy and

quality of *places*” (DeBord 94, italics in the original). Now Talen found himself watching as New York succumbed to the social, architectural, and cultural erosion of which DeBord warned. Talen asked, “Since Broadway became Vegas, the selling is twenty-four hours a day, and it’s all the same place, so why say anything here, and why say it now?” (WSID 45). For him, this is the crux of the problem. New York City, once it had yielded to the franchises and big box stores, was literally converted to “the same place” as any other place in which those retail spaces existed. When Talen contested the right of commercial interests and Giuliani’s authority to cleanse the City, he was obviously preaching against powerful forces. The global market requires global consumption of large volumes of identical products which can be produced in similar manufacturing facilities worldwide. Not only is there no requirement for variety in consumer or community, but any variation actually slows consumption and forces product changes. Talen was thus fighting the commercial pressure to turn New York City into a homogenized, indistinguishable retail property.<sup>63</sup>

Talen believed this “no man’s land” was also internalized: “How do we revalue (or even notice) our commonest gestures and exclamations, remember our personal and public memories? So much of resisting

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<sup>63</sup> Revisions to products, such as updated versions, with new features, also spur capitalism, but in capitalism the release of such updates is a managed process designed to promote further large-scale consumption of the updated product.

transnational corporations is remembering things we've been told to forget. What story do I have that isn't a part of a product's language?" (*WSID* 123). The product's story, representations, allure, and cultural space allowed it to inform and shape the self-image and personal histories of the people who came into contact with it. For Talen, this caused the commercialized, gentrified areas and the people living in them to become dysfunctional, with these neighborhoods losing their rich, sometimes seedy, but definitely unique natures, and thereafter delivering only a mock representation of social structure and cultural fare. Functional neighborhoods, according to Talen, generate unique, personal stories that are resistant to commodification and regimentation. Talen might recognize that no neighborhood is truly free of commodification, but to the extent that a neighborhood can generate its own culture, it can be said to be working for its citizens: "When my neighborhood's working, those are the stories that come up" (Talen *WSID* 123).

How dysfunctional a neighborhood and its inhabitants might become under pressure from advertising the allure of the product was suggested by DeBord's analysis. He described the way subjects came to be estranged from their society of spectacle, an estrangement "expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere"

(16). DeBord's subjects are Talen's neighbors, all estranged from their own actions, as they forget the neighbor that once served them coffee, while they now order and consume Starbucks's coffee as though it were the righteous inheritor of the neighborhood itself.

Talen described the corrosion of his own once-vibrant neighborhood as a loss of interpersonal dialogue: "There is a narrowing of the kinds of language that are shared in public, a regularization of gestures. It happens so gradually as a neighborhood dies that people only notice an untraceable emptiness, a certain dullness" (*WSID* 121). As the loss of distinctive neighborhood space increases, the manner in which individuals perform their daily interactions becomes more regimented; language, expression, and movement are all curtailed. This contraction of individuality, as Talen describes it, also seems to inhibit the ability, or inclination, to think abstractly; it appears to hinder intellect, as well as performance. Struggling with these concerns, he continues, "[H]ow did ordinary life become colonized? Lots of people have discussed with greater skill than I how corporations conquered the last frontier, ordinary living" (Talen *WSID* 122). This insight situates a dramatic juxtaposition he will investigate; the "ordinary" has become a frontier and a battleground.

Talen's shift in perspective allowed him to see New York City as a native land in need of defense. He recognized the colonization of

culturally specific markets through the colonizer's shopping malls, the leveling of language to the colonizer's uniform communication, the planting of the colonizer's flag in the form of billboards, and the reinforcement of the colonizer's political economic message through a torrent of advertisements, news, internet popups, radio, television, and commercialized, branded tourism. As is typical of any colonization, the people who support the colonizer's regime find homes for themselves as the native people flee: "Commodification leaves the neighborhood strewn with silent boxes of stylish air. The rents are so high that there's centrifugal spinning here, and a lot of people will fly off to outer Queens" (Talen *WSID* 121).

This multi-pronged assault many of destroyed many of the cultural supports of the people of New York City. Their identities and relationships, community bonds, and history gave way. Political and economic forces could seize the cultural rights of New Yorkers in ways commonly associated with the loss of other native lands, a loss described by anthropologist Amahl Bishara described in terms of cultural rights in Jerusalem:

The discourse of cultural property is a cluster of related ideas taken up by anthropologists, indigenous peoples' advocates, and philosophers. ... [C]ultural property arguments are strategies used to assert that groups have

a collective, proprietary right to the objects, ideas, practices, and land to which they are (or have in the past been) connected. (145)

From Bishara's perspective on a different contest, Talen's decision to fight powerful interests for Times Square, and other New York neighborhoods, might be described as an assertion of cultural property rights. In concert with Bishara's description, Talen claimed not only a right to the defense of his community's cultural property, but to reclaim that which had belonged to the community in the recent past. Bishara does not address the length of time or the relationship necessary for an individual to establish an integrated bond with his or her community's cultural property or establishment of cultural rights. This is of particular interest in Talen's case, as New York City, its neighborhoods, its culture, and the cultural property associated with it, were not a part of his native rights. He had had a long appreciation for the City through his long engagement with several theatrical venues and through his youthful romanticization of the coastal cultural hubs. However, he was not born to the City and had not grown to manhood there, so his assertions with regard to neighborhood identities might also be considered an external influence. While he spoke to native New Yorkers and community residents about the effects of chain and big box stores and franchises on their lives and sense of neighborhood, Talen could be said to be

performing and presenting those disruptions, rather than fundamentally experiencing them himself. This adds shades of complexity to Talen's New York neighborhood arguments, which he may have brought with him into New York. Recall that his poem, "Walter Sullivan of *The New York Times*," spoke of the incursion of cement-trucks—harbringers of neighborhood destruction—very early on in his writing, long before he had ever been a resident of New York City.

The loss of New York City land to franchises, Starbucks cafes, and big box stores could potentially be reversed, and Talen began that reversal through his assertion of a collective, proprietary right to the original premise of New York City. Through critical discourse and performative protest, Talen challenged the loss of New York's physical space—the square footage of retail space—to large foreign business. Talen was not the first to use theatre to challenge changing social and cultural norms. In the 1930s, Hallie Flanagan, the director of the Federal Theatre Project explained its mission: "The Federal Theatre is a pioneer theatre because it is part of a tremendous re-thinking, re-building and re-dreaming of America" (Kazacoff 320). In concert with Flanagan's argument that theatre could change social trajectory, Talen's Reverend Billy Project also undertook to change the direction of his community's social momentum. To aid in this undertaking, Talen named his assemblage of singers, talkers, and followers *The Church of Stop Shopping*. This name united the



people who gravitated to his message, creating a more purposeful group. It also tied neatly into his project of creating a reverend who focused on social issues. A reverend is more powerful if a church stands with him. Talen understood this: “The animating principal of *The Church of Stop Shopping*...was ‘community defense’ ... [and] community reclamation” (Talen WWJB 81-82).

Even though Talen admits, “It is laughable to think that I can push back the tide of the great anthropomorphized mouse, Mickey,” he believed that the people of his Church might challenge the tide. “But you are the impossible congregation that needs to be emptied from this church,” he said, stressing that, to be successful, the work must be done in public space (Talen *WSID* 42). One of the problems is that the space is not truly public, but privately owned, though presented as a public space, and therefore privately controlled. Talen refers to these spaces as privatized commons, which he, his congregation, and choir enter to confront an adversary of tremendous size and power (*WSID* 3).

It’s a struggle against some people that are killing us.

When I’m in a certain mood, I’ll use that phrase “enemy.”

It’s hard to overestimate the impact that the transnational corporations are having on people, on individuals, on neighborhoods, on small businesses, on peace, on the idea of peace, on the idea of getting along with people. So yea,

their kind of enemy. ... At some point, you really don't want to do it all over again. You don't want to manufacture violence certainly. ... I am a song and dance man type political person. I am not an anarchist with a Molotov cocktail. I do want to use imagery and language that changes the way people look at things. I don't separate out the arts from political work and I don't separate the arts and political work from spiritual work. I don't lay claim to any of those three political labels (Post, Palacios, and Talen).

The choir, he says are all "hard core singer/talkers ... reclaim[ing] public space" (Talen *WSID* 5). This reclamation is not a restoration, but a challenge by Talen, and his followers, who assert the right to speak and act in those privatized commons, as they reclaim space for public discourse. Political activists are "grand heroes and sometimes ... clown and fools. And I'm of the latter tradition" (Palacios, and Talen). With his troupe of clowns and fools, he repeatedly challenges corporate ownership of memory and geography, contesting rights to both the physical property and the discourse.

### **Retail intervention – learning to trespass**

After Talen's year of training at the Mouse's door, he began exploring his power to disrupt by staging more retail interventions "inside

... chain stores, principally Disney, the GAP, Nike, and Starbucks” (“Staff”). Jason Grote, who participated in one such intervention in which he locked arms with four other men who blocked a cash register line while Reverend Billy preached, records the Reverend:

CHILDREN STOP SHOPPING FOR A MOMENT, LISTEN TO ME. ... This is Manhattan as Suburban Mall. This is a fatal disease known as Involuntary Entertainment. This is the disease known as Continuous Shopping. This is downing in a Sea of Identical Details. ...We can begin to recall what desire was when it was not supervised. (366)

As Grote chanted with the group, he observed the reactions of the shoppers to this disruption. Shoppers “are encouraged to remain comfortable at all times,” he explained For this reason, retail establishments are designed for a pleasurable, comfortable shopping experience. The tranquility of retail stores, especially in the carefully crafted large retailers, big box stores, and franchises, creates an atmosphere which helps consumers avoid reflection on the moral choices inherent in contemporary shopping experiences. Thus, “there emerges no moral dissonance between buying a pair of cargo pants and hanging on to our good consciences,” Grote determined (366). Because of Talen’s reframing of the shopping experience, and in spite of the encouragement to remain comfortable, Grote saw discomfort begin to appear on the

shoppers' faces, as Talen disrupted and challenged the carefully constructed peace of the shopping experience.

The discomfort that Grote saw is important to Talen's mission because it reveals that the shoppers' complacency has been shattered. The mosaic of broken comfort allows Talen's social and cultural arguments to seep into the shopping experience, opening up opportunity for social discourse. The look of discomfort signifies that the shopper has been critically awakened. They are no longer being lulled by the familiarity of their surroundings, which allows shoppers to assume, without question the meaning, purpose, and foundation of their environment. The familiarity of the retail store, or to use Talen's terms, the store's sea of "identical details," is central to major retail and franchise design, because it does not excite, and therefore does not provoke argument or assessment. As long as the store, or café, does not engage its shoppers analytically, the transmission of information and message flows in only one direction. A key message is that the store is compliant with its society's values. The store's design, prepared by the corporation's marketing division, contains within it a message that the store meets its society's social norms. These norms, usually unwritten, define the behavioral expectations of members of society. As long as the retail stage is set correctly, its employees perform to anticipated standards, and the storyline is not disrupted, its audience of shoppers is

comfortable with their shopping experience. Talen's counter-performance challenges the store's message, disrupts the designed complacency, and, if successful, causes the shopper to question the retailer's storyline. The shoppers may not become converts to Talen's Church, but once they are so awakened, they become aware that an alternative argument exists. Engaging that argument, even in a limited way changes the shopping experience, even though the depth of that engagement may vary by shopper.

The performance, which Grote observed, brought images from outside of the shopping experience into the retail environment: "We want them to think of the faceless Indonesian woman that made the crap, or of the people who were forced to leave the neighborhood to make room for it" (366). Grote did not expect that the shoppers would be receptive to Talen's message, but he recognized the insertion of a gap between the competing messages of the retailer and Talen: "Bill talks about his actions as 'complicating' the shopping experience; what Disney offers up is a life without complications" (366). Talen's complication allows seamless retail messages to unravel just a bit, thereby creating opportunity for alternative ideas.

The intervention in which Grote participated was not a lengthy event. It ended in a peaceful arrest after Talen and the troupe told the officers that they would not leave, except by arrest, and that they would

not resist arrest. According to Grote's recollection and reflection, the police were "unusually nice to us" (367). Grote attributes this gentleness to the form of their protest: "Our protest was a theatricalized version of direct action, much in the same way that Disney's 'Celebration, Florida' is a theatricalized version of a suburb" (367). Grote's description of the theatrical nature of the action noted that there was an audience that was being "entertained," lawyers who were not lawyers but an NYU law school class project, and the cops, who through their understanding of the event, seemed "closer to their TV counterparts" than they were to themselves (367).

Retail stages were not Talen's sole performance venues. He also produced new theatrical pieces that also challenged the borders between audience and performer. In the late 1990s, as we have seen in San Francisco, interactive theatre was finding receptive participatory audiences in New York as well. Talen aligned his artistic vision with this movement and brought his interventional style to local theatres. His play, *Church of Billy*, included the staging of "whole 'Worships' in the tradition of ritual-based interactive plays of the day such as *Tony and Tina's Wedding*, *Late-Night Catechism*,<sup>64</sup> *Blue Man Group*, and *de la Guarda*" (revbilly.com Staff). Like Talen's performances, these interactive

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<sup>64</sup> Cassaro, Nancy, and Thomas M. Allen. *Tony N' Tina's Wedding*. New York: French, 1994.

plays involved the audience in the performance. For instance, 1997's *Late-Night Catechism*, written by Vicki Quade and Maripat Donovan, brings the audience into the performance as students of a Catholic nun in an adult catechism class. In *Tony n' Tina's Wedding*, written by a satirical comedy troupe, Artificial Intelligence, and opening in 1988, the audience ate, drank, and mingled with the actors in a performance of a large Italian wedding. Both *Late-Night Catechism* and Talen's *Church of Billy* would enjoy many runs through the next few years, and were listed in the *New York Times*' theatre listing along with other shows (New York Times). *Church of Billy* ran in a variety of venues, such as St. Clements and Dixon Place, allowing Talen to experiment with this new form of social "worship," giving him the ability to refine the work with each presentation.

Blue Man Group, in its early performances, was a working collective of performers which engaged the audiences in a wild swirl of activity involving coffee cups, ideas, and constant interruptions. The performance moved in a carefully orchestrated, if seemingly chaotic, performance. Lynn Swanson's review of Blue Man Group's *Tubes*, in *High Performance*, in 1991, highlighted an instrument made of PVC piping, a meal of Twinkies shared with a member of the audience, and a painting created by spitting paint balls onto a canvas.

The fourth collective troupe, de la Guarda, also created an interactive theatre piece, “Villa Villa, ” in 1999. *Theatre Journal* reviewed this: “The feeling of expectation is augmented by a slight sense of claustrophobia--not enough to cause panic, yet enough to disturb the most jaded theatregoer” (Knopf 457). Knopf added that the show had the “aggressive sexuality that harken(ed) back to the Living Theatre and the Performance Group” (458).

With Talen’s recent discovery of the staging of retail space and these well-received interactive performances as part of the theatrical milieu, Talen saw the opportunity to extend his interventions beyond speaking to the audience by finding ways to include the audience in his performances, even though he performed outside in non-traditional theatrical space. Unlike the then contemporary interactive plays, the audience in Talen’s retail performances did not buy tickets to attend, to be startled, or to engage. Nor were those plays as specifically message oriented as were his retail interventions. One could argue that these two key aspects shaped Talen’s work in the image of Augusto Boal’s Invisible Theatre. First, as Boal describes the Invisible Theatre: “The chosen subject must be an issue of burning importance” (277), and further, “From that starting point a small play is constructed. The actors must play their parts as if they were playing in a traditional theatre, for a traditional audience. However, when the play is ready, it will be



performed in a place which is not a theatre and for an audience which is not an audience” (277).

Boal described Invisible Theatre as:

[T]he presentation of a scene in an environment other than the theatre before people who are not spectators. The place be a restaurant, or a sidewalk, a market, a train, a line of people, etc. The people who witness the scene are those who are there by chance. During the spectacle, these people must not have the slightest idea that it is a “spectacle,” for this would make them “spectators.” (Boal 1993 143-144)

Therefore, even though Talen credits the interactive play environment, which helped him develop the maturity of his intervention, as the foundation of his work, these two components of the Invisible Theatre—the issue of burning importance, and the audience which is not an audience—are central to his work and have much more in common with Boal’s socially charged theatre than other interactive plays of the time.

Grote, too, argued that Talen’s ritual-based interventions, which developed in production from individual story to group commitment and ritualized acting, were created, in part, “on Invisible Theatre methods developed by activists and theatre artists in the 1960s and 1970s, wherein actors would blend into public crowds and try to spark

conversation” (362). One of Talen’s interactive interventions would involve having members of his choir “enter the store incognito and get into discussions with each other, or with imaginary people on toy cell phones, about the neurotic experience of shopping in the Times Square Disney Store” (Grote 362). Talen named this particular form of intervention *The Cell Phone Opera*.

In this piece, the actors would mentally choose a person with whom they had experienced a difficult relationship and with whom they had argued in the past. They were then to enact a mission to the Disney store to buy a gift at that person’s behest for a child whom they both knew. The script, which was modifiable based on how events changed, called for the actor to enter the store to buy the gift, then to change her mind about doing so. She would then use the toy cell phone to call the person who had sent her to the store and argue against the purchase of the toy. These individual acts preceded Talen’s entrance into the Disney Store, once the actors were in place, phones in hand, standing by their chosen “devil” toy. Talen referred to these moments as “[t]he most electric theatre in town,” which says much considering that Talen was in New York City (Talen *WSID* 73).

Talen’s church deacons, whom he suggested might be called political action managers, orchestrated the opera, signaling the actors to raise their voices to drown out the store’s taped music and directing the

performance as security arrived to break up the show. “The real customers gathered around in a curving crowd,” according to Talen (WSID 76). This orchestrated disruption was the outcome Boal anticipated, as well: “The invisible theatre erupts in a location chosen as a place where the public congregates. All the people who are near become involved in the eruption and the effects of it last long after the skit is ended” (Boal 1993 144).

Boal said the burning issue “must be a matter of profound and genuine concern for the future spect-actors” (277). Talen’s intervention was determinedly based on this requirement, though his audience, which was obviously not an ordinary audience, did not initially grasp the burning issue. They did not recognize any danger presented by Disney’s products, and they were probably ignorant as to the working conditions under which the Mouse’s products were produced. When “the real customers gathered around,” they became a real audience and Talen took this opportunity to clarify the burning issue for them. Prior to his entrance, his actors in *The Cell Phone Opera* had hidden small tape recorders among the plush animals. Suddenly, out of these piles of toys blared recordings that “had been prerecorded with quotes from the Bangladeshi women who worked in one of the sweatshops Disney contracts” (Talen WSID 77). One example: “When women reach thirty or thirty-five years of age they are too old and not fit to work, their eyesight

is no good, they are forced to quit. They leave penniless, even if they plead” (Talen *WSID* 79).

As noted, the interactive theatrical performances of this time shared cultural space with theatrical protests and this brought Reverend Billy into contact with others experimenting with audience participation, or hoping to draw an audience through performative protest. Talen and his troupe travelled to Seattle to join with many other groups for the 1999 protest of the World Trade Organization, in what would later be called the “Battle in Seattle,” a protest in which thousands challenged the economic practices of the WTO. Reverend Billy and a cadre of anti-consumerists believers joined with the mass of demonstrators to stage alternative viewpoints to the WTO’s liberalized global trade policies. The WTO History Project, a joint effort of several programs at the University of Washington,<sup>65</sup> described this gathering of protesters as “an incredibly significant moment in the history of popular protests” and argued that the protesters not only succeeded in disrupting the proceedings of the WTO, but also gathered together a very diverse assembly of protest organizations, which “worked together to orchestrate the protest events.”<sup>66</sup> Michelle Dent, in *The Drama Review*, described the 1999 WTO

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<sup>65</sup> “WTO History Project.”

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

protest as well-organized and anchored in both theatrical performance and history:

The method of protest during the “Battle in Seattle” was largely a nonviolent and smartly outfitted effort both in terms of the incorporation of performance techniques as a means of passive resistance (think Bread and Puppet meets the Rainbow Coalition meets Green Peace meets UAW), combined with media and legal tactics (through the internet and on the ground). In fact, the “Battle” was so well outfitted that it managed not only to outsmart, but to disgrace the police and the mayor’s office, who could not manage the massive crowds that took over the downtown corridor and parts of the adjacent neighborhood of Capitol Hill. (128-129)

Direct Action Network organized much of the activity of the WTO protesters, coordinating “a complex series of blockades and lockdowns involving five or six thousand activists” (Graeber 292). DAN’s effective use of an improvised communications network, including cell phones, radios, police scanners, and Palm Pilots allowed protesters to adapt quickly to police tactics.

This massive protest was heady, educational, and nurturing for Reverend Billy’s developing philosophy and fledgling church. Fellow

believers had coalesced around him and accompanied him to Seattle. The Choir officially donned their robes for the first time as they joined in the protest. According to Talen, “The lady who purchased the turtle costumes for the activists who famously blocked the front lobby of the WTO delegates’ hotel also bought robes for the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir” (Wiegink) Reverend Billy was no longer a lone performer, but a troupe. The members of this troupe adopted the name “*The Church of Stop Shopping*” and the “Stop Shopping Choir” became an integral component of the Church and its performances.

### **The church as theatre**

In addition to his activist performances, Talen continued to present his Church and Reverend Billy as theatre. He did not forget that Reverend Billy was born in the solo performance venues of San Francisco. In October, 1997, Anita Gate reviewed *The Church of Billy*, as presented at St. Clement’s Church, and found the performance to be uneven. The service began as a kind of “revival meeting,” with Brother Gary (Gary Bass) playing *I’ll Fly Away*, while Sister P. J. (P. J. Nelson) conveyed “pure small-town church-ladyness” as she greeted each worshiper; the congregation joined in with “Amazing Grace.” According to Gate, the performance began well enough, with Sister Vanessa (Vanessa Kilmek) vowing to “put the odd back in God. ” Before launching into his sermon, Reverend Billy called for “on-line worshipers to send their

experiences to revbilly@revbilly.com” (Gate 125). Talen’s appearance was promising, says Gate: “Good-looking Billy is the perfect traveling preacher for the backroads of America, offering a godly thrill to people who don’t get exposed to a lot of charisma” (125). However, the performance faltered, Gate writes, when “Billy” had “a little breakdown” during the sermon, and rambled on about a cross-dresser, Mickey Mouse, ruling the Disney Store, and the need for Vanessa and Gary to cover for him as he was “screaming that we’re all ‘frozen-gourmet-chicken dinner’” (125). “Ultimately,” she writes, “the production, which is wonderfully funny at first, falls apart about the same time Billy does. If Mr. Talen, who also wrote this one-act comedy, rewrote his breakdown, he might have a super show” (Gate 125). While Gate saw the “breakdown” as inconsistent with the rest of the show, the idea of a televangelist having a public breakdown had been seen in the performances of Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker, traditional Christian televangelists.

Talen continued to develop *The Church of Billy*. In keeping with the original script wherein Reverend Billy called for his online congregation to “E’ me,” in the Dixon Place run he added direct on-line interaction with his congregation, maintaining his commitment to a participating, interactive audience. In April, of 1998, Matthew Mirapaul reported that *The Church of Billy* was to “accept live Internet submissions so that

[Talen could] react to the Internet denizens kneeling in the ‘unseen mezzanine.’ ” The choice extended his earlier productions which called for Internet submissions; now Talen reacted live to his internet audience’s submissions.

In his interview with Mirapaul, Talen explained the importance of the internet congregation: “[T]here are a couple of places where people can still have the possibility of original experience. ...[Y]ou’re sharing original experience, you’re sharing bafflement, you’re sharing storytelling and you’re doing it where the CEOs of giant companies want to be” (Mirapaul). For Talen, the internet mezzanine could function as a neighborhood where voices could be heard without corporate sponsorship, thereby limiting corporate manipulation. The inclusion of the immediate live reaction was an experiment with developing and extending community.<sup>67</sup>

Sean McGrath’s April, 1998, review in *Playbill* described this “latest incantation of *The Church of Billy*” as beginning with the Reverend’s motto, “We believe in a God that people who don’t believe in God believe in” (“NY’s Dixon Place”). In this 1998 version, Talen still challenged Mickey Mouse, but neither Mirapaul nor McGrath called this a “breakdown,” suggesting that the various themes had been more

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<sup>67</sup> In this that he says he still attends church and that “...his religious education has certainly inspired his art” (Mirapaul) This article also mentioned a cybercast performance and, further explains the terms, “Godsighting.”



smoothly integrated by this time. McGrath quoted the script, “You are surrounded by absurdity and the yawning abyss of Mickey Mouse’s face. Reach up into his fascist eyes, and steal from that black smile, your Godsighting” (“NY’s Dixon Place”).<sup>68</sup>

Even as Talen developed *The Church of Billy*, he also presented Reverend Billy in the show *I Was a Tourist in Times Square*, which played at the HERE, 145 Spring Street, from October 23<sup>rd</sup> through November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1998. McGrath said, “The play’s title refers to the day the Reverend “experienced defilement” after boldly making his way through the hellmouth of Disney in order to purchase a turquoise plastic Minnie Mouse dressed as the Statue of Liberty” (McGrath “Solo Performer”).

By February of 1999, Talen had brought *The Church of Billy* to St. Clement’s Playhouse and to maturity, with Sean McGrath reporting that opening night had sold out. Act One was a sermon, and Act Two followed, “Billy and the audience to the Disney Store for a ‘shopping’” (McGrath “Billy Returns”). In addition to the deftness with which Talen played Reverend Billy and from acclaim of *The Church of Billy*, Talen

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<sup>68</sup> McGrath noted that “Talen’s preacher gained a cult following through a public access television show, eventually leading to a Web radio show ([The Church of Billy's Website](#)) and live performances, in New York's Times Square. An earlier incarnation of *The Church of Billy* appeared at St. Clement’s Church, in October 1997. All performances of *Billy* will be simulcast live on his website, with web surfers urged to email their own private ‘Godsightings’ to the Reverend at [revbilly.com](#).”

retained the message that “Mickey Mouse is the Anti-Christ” (McGrath “Billy Returns”).

In an overview of Talen’s work in this period, Jonathan Kalb described Reverend Billy as a larger-than-life televangelist who strutted the stage and commanded attention:

His pulpit, when he performs in theaters, is a red Village Voice distribution box, apparently stolen from a street corner, with his own picture displayed in the window. He wears a clerical collar over a black shirt and a white tuxedo jacket, the bleached-blond tips of his too neatly coiffed rockabilly haircut adding just the right note to his uncannily accurate Jimmy Swaggart imitation. (“Spring Theater”)

Kalb warned New Yorkers that “anyone who has not seen him has been missing some of the most courageous, hilarious and pointed political theater in New York. This is not a type of theater that only takes place in auditoriums or other controlled environments but one that can also appear in what Mr. Talen calls ‘the tight proscenium arches that are in the subways, in the lobbies of buildings and in parks’” (“Spring Theater”).

In April of 1999, Bill Talen brought Reverend Billy to the stage again, this time in a production called *The Church of Stop Shopping* which ran through May at both The Present Company’s Theatorium and

the Theatre at St. Clement's (McGrath "NY's Rev. Billy"). McGrath's posting for this play read much the same as his introductions to *The Church of Billy* and *I Was a Tourist in Times Square*. Talen also took Reverend Billy to the 1999 New York International Fringe Festival.<sup>69</sup> It would appear from this that Talen's Reverend Billy was not so much creating new shows and new material as creating opportunities for the Reverend to speak to and to expand his congregation.

### **The millennial questions**

Talen participated in a video project, *A Day in the Hype of America*, which was filmed entirely on New Year's Eve, 1999, as the new millennium opened. The film opens with Talen's challenging questions about the commercialization of Times Square: "Do you want me to preach here? Do you have a good background for me?" (Hype). He called Times Square a vertical mall, which he hoped would not exist into the new millennium. The mall will be replaced because "we will have some values ourselves" (Hype). Talen explains that New Yorkers will tell the Mayor that they do not buy Times Square as it now exists and, further, that the celebration at midnight will be for the de-malling of Times Square and for fighting the "hype" that has been directed at the American public. He defines hype as the act of stimulating, exciting, or agitating. Talen, as Reverend Billy, uses hype in order to promote his

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<sup>69</sup> McNulty.

social concerns. He argues, however, that the hype of the new millennium is an end in itself—an entertaining distraction from important issues

Act 1 of the film focuses on how hype is produced. The film turns first to Albert Whitehat, a Native American who explains that in his Native universe, time is measured from sunup to noon and noon to sunset, and he barely acknowledges the importance of the millennium to his cultural vision. Having been told that a new millennium is coming, he refers to this as part of a “new vocabulary” that he just heard about this past year. When his people, however, refer to units of centuries, they just say, “a long time ago.” This scene is followed by a jarring shift to New York City, highlighting the frenetic pace of everyday city life. In this segment Reverend Billy challenges the marketing of the millennium and questions whether it has any true value or importance. By linking these attitudes and appreciations of time and space, directors Quist and Martin set the stage to present their argument that “the millennium” as constructed by modern media as a cultural rather than a factual concept.

Talen then introduces first himself and then Reverend Billy as a character that he inhabits: “Reverend Billy is kind of a Buster Keaton figure who is greatly impacted by the force of American product delivery—advertising, all the retail delivery systems. ... He’s a pratfalling

priest” (Hype). Of Times Square, he compares it to a suburban mall outside of Akron, Ohio. “These are the identical details of Anywhere, USA. What am I saying!? Anywhere, Earth,” he explains (Hype). Talen also mentions his mentor Lanier, in the film, saying that Lanier suggested there was a “role for a comic preacher as a prophetic social organizer” (Hype). This character, Reverend Billy, revealed the replication of identical details throughout the world that deprived people of their sense of place leaving “us not knowing where we are. It takes our sense of place” (Hype). Talen describes Reverend Billy’s script as “[a] well-preached diatribe [that] delivers a kind of impact that is somewhere between rock and roll and spoken-word poetry. It’s a heightened kind of communication that makes people giggle and shout” (Hype).

“Everywhere you go. Every Starbucks’, Kinko’s, Staples’ details, they’re all the same. After a while, you just don’t know where you are. If you don’t know where you are, eventually you don’t know who you are and that’s what they want,” he continues (Hype). Talen goes on to claim that one of the goals of large corporations is to make it impossible for people to recognize their own uniqueness because from an advertising perspective, it is easier to market to a homogeneous group. Much of Talen’s argument in this debate concerns his fear that unique communities will be ceaselessly consumed by the identical details produced by transnational corporations. To tie this to the eve of the year

2000—the eve of the millennium—Talen argued that the millennium might have been a moment of meaningful change, except that millennial discourse was seized by corporate media:

One year ago the Disney company, the great content provider of our world, who at present time owns thirty percent of the TV stations in this country, Disney took upon itself to be the great host of the millennial idea. And somehow that word multiplied to become ten thousand products and advertising starts driving the public discourse of what the millennium might be. I thought a year ago that science fiction or ... maybe what's left of religion or -- I saw other things driving the question. I didn't think transnationals were driving the question. (Hype)

Of Reverend Billy, Talen says, “[He] wants some balance, some steadiness, some new intimacy in his neighborhood. He wants to feel that chain stores are not going to wipe everything out, that advertising is not going to cover up the buildings. He wants to feel that the sky is not going to be covered with some skywriting logos. He feels invaded right now” (Hype).

As an antidote to the transnational millennial pressure he felt, Talen created “a rambunctious countermillennial” festival (“Shortlist”). The *Village Voice* described the festival as “a holy mission to save New

York neighborhoods from total corporate supervision” (“Shortlist”). The week-long culture-jamming counter effort included a wide variety of performers and tricksters including: Great Small Works, Samuel R. Delany, Patricia Smith, Reno, Rinde Eckert, Emelio Sanchez, Dance Liberation Front, and some 80 others.

Ever busy, at the millennial cusp, Talen also continued his worships with the “Church of Stop Shopping,” canonizing activists as saints, including those who ran the Esperanza community garden\ \ and Charles Kernaghan, a labor rights organizer. He culminated each worship with a foray into the streets, encouraging the congregation to engage in political action themed to coincide with the newly recognized saints’ social ideals. In December as the new millennium approached, Talen also produced a festival of political performance, “Millennium’s Neighborhood,” at the Judson Memorial Church.<sup>70</sup>

In one event, Megan Wolff, trained in one of Talen’s New School workshops, led the audience on a tour of the three Starbucks at Astor Place. Her discussion covered coffee’s economic history, the role of coffee in the American Revolution, and the politics of public space.<sup>71</sup> Of Starbucks’ infiltration of the Astor Place neighborhood, Wolff told the *Village Voice*, “[Starbucks saturates] the neighborhood until the

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<sup>70</sup> Solomon “Rage.”

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

competitors become invisible and soon the neighborhood itself becomes invisible. ”<sup>72</sup>

While the “Millenium’s Neighborhood” project also addressed the use of New York’s buildings as billboard space, Reverend Billy preached against the replacement of small business by megastores in New York’s neighborhoods, citing economies of scale that favor big businesses, undermine working conditions, and lead to environmental decline. These projects brought a growing number of participants to the congregation and, as *Village Voice* columnist Alisa Solomon noted, they created space within the cultural milieu for Talen to embody spiritual leadership. <sup>73</sup> As Peter Laarman, Judson Memorial Church’s senior minister, told the *New York Press*, “When it comes down to it, Reverend Billy is a great preacher”<sup>74</sup>

In March of 2000, the officials of New York struck a blow against their gadfly by showing up at Talen’s home with 100 summons, demanding payment of \$100. 00 for each of them, as a fine for his posting flyers advertised his performances. <sup>75</sup> The rich irony of this \$10,000 fine is that the flyers advertising a sermon/performance that

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> “A real man of the cloth puts it more simply. ‘When it comes down to it,’ says Peter Laarman, senior minister of Judson Memorial Church, ‘Reverend Billy is a great preacher’ (Murad).

<sup>75</sup> Solomon “Never.”



railed against the use of the walls and buildings of New York City as advertising space. Despite the \$10,000 fine, the service proceeded, after which, Talen led his flock to old St. Patrick's Cathedral, charging that the ad placed there was "disturbing the dead with its promise to help them know anything with About.com" (Solomon "Never Can").

The initial inspiration for this performance was the fact that an iconic portrait of Jean-Michel Basquiat had been painted over and replaced with a Dockers ad. Added to this, huge fabric signs were draped over the sides of nearby buildings, producing an effect Talen describes: "You're sitting drinking your coffee one morning and it feels like the windows are unusually dirty. ... You're living inside an ad now" (Solomon "Never Can").

As Solomon points out, the paradoxes are many. If successful, Talen's sermon that extolls people to stop shopping might cause the economy to grind to a halt, but this same economic "system requires workers to be poorly paid to boost the profits of corporations, while simultaneously needing those same workers to buy, buy, buy—and thus borrow, borrow, borrow" ( "Never Can"). Common religious tropes fuel the service; in a mock "witnessing," the congregation waves their credit cards in the air and the choir sings, supporting and underscoring the sermon, as the Reverend demands, "Isn't it good to believe in something?" (Solomon "Never Can"). Meanwhile the congregation rises to

its own peculiar chanting of a series of “we believes”: “We believe in the voluntary withdrawal by Starbucks, Duane Reade, Staples, Disney, Gap, and Barnes and Noble from, if not New York, just get out of my face.” All of this, Solomon says, is both ironic and consequential: “Far from merely parodying ... hypocrisy, Reverend Billy is tapping into the communal, sacral origins of theater, offering media-saturated young audiences a share in the messy, public present-ness of live performance” (“Never Can”).<sup>76</sup>

Of equal import, she continues, “he is sanctifying secular activism.” The scriptural readings of the church include texts by William Burroughs, Walter Benjamin, and Toni Morrison. New saints are inducted into the church each week, including the proprietors of a bulldozed community garden and a cyber-guerrilla group, RTMark (Solomon “Never Can”). Through these sermon performances, Talen continued his critique of the state and its economy.

In 2000, other forces joined the Reverend’s rage against Starbucks, when pressure from Global Exchange, one of the IMF rally organizers, launched a nationwide campaign challenging Starbucks on issues of

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<sup>76</sup> An additional source: In the New York of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Reverend Billy's art is not without risk. In addition to a mounting arrest record, Talen was recently slapped with \$10,000 in fines for the time-honored act of posting notices of his performances on lampposts. <http://motherjones.com/politics/2000/07/outfront#>

ecological damage and overseas labor conditions.<sup>77</sup> Global Exchange's action, "Roast Starbucks," was cancelled when Starbucks agreed to carry Fair Trade-certified coffee in its stores.<sup>78</sup> While this capitulation by Starbucks was sufficient to call off Global Exchange, it did not deter Reverend Billy. Talen understood it as a minor concession by a global firm that Starbucks would use as a marketing tool and then shelve in short order. Meanwhile, Talen knew this measure would not deter Starbucks' development plans and that neighborhoods would continue to fall under Starbucks' expansionist goals, resulting in pools of corporate monoculture where functional neighborhoods had once thrived.

In April, 2000, Talen announced a 24-hour "preachathon" in which he planned to visit all 101 Manhattan Starbucks. Unfortunately the stores close at 10 p. m. , so the Reverend was forced to adjust his schedule and the preachathon became a months-long campaign.<sup>79</sup> Using a quiet beginning, as he did on George Cudahy's campaign trail, the visits to Starbucks start off simply enough, with Reverend Billy chatting up a few customers, drawing them out on the tastiness of the coffee, and enjoying the approval of the shop clerks. Eventually though, affirmations give way and the Reverend is moved by a more vibrant spirit. Solomon

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<sup>77</sup> Solomon "Rage."

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

describes this transition from, “’Hallelujah! I loooooove the coffee in Starbucks, children!’” to a charge that the store’s “’earth-tone touchy-feeliness masks corporate ruthlessness. ”<sup>80</sup> The support staff hand out brochures on the labor rights and environmental impacts of that ruthlessness, the manager reaches for the phone to call the police, and the Reverend exits with a booming, “’Amen, people. ”<sup>81</sup>

Of his two ministries, Starbucks and Disney stores, Talen explained that Starbucks is a more difficult act. In the Disney stores, he is approaching indolent tourists and “comically paranoid salespeople.”<sup>82</sup> In Starbucks, however, the coffee sippers are willfully in their own worlds, so it becomes more difficult to draw them in, says Talen. <sup>83</sup> The difference between the two, the tourists and the sippers, is that the tourists are merely lethargic, whereas Starbucks’ customers are purposely disengaged, using the shield of identical details to block outside engagement. Once Starbucks’ patrons begin to hear the sermon, “’it’s more direct, it has more traction. People live nearby and remember what used to be here. ” The Reverend relies on those memories to

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

underscore his charges of ruthlessness and destruction of neighborhoods.<sup>84</sup>

During this campaign, Talen invited short sermons from his followers, and Solomon announced this request in her *Village Voice* column. Within one day of his announcement, he received 80 responses. One read:

[B]est small Italian bakery in the charted universe, where a gooey pastry and coffee was still \$1. 50, and perfect Sunday hangover food. It was a short jog from the bounty of Damascus Bakery, a haven of wonderful Middle Eastern sweets and breads, both of which go better with strong coffee than any white-bread crap from Morebucks.<sup>85</sup>

These messages buoyed Talen: “People are describing their neighborhoods with such force. ... they're actively missing people and places. ’ He pauses, as if to leave some space for a few amens. ‘It makes me think that something is possible. ’”<sup>86</sup>

In November, the Historic Districts Council awarded Talen the “Grassroots Preservation Award” for his work in 2000 to protect the Poe House, at 85 W. 3rd Street, from demolition (hdc.org). Explaining his

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

impulse to save the property: “I just wanted the old brick row house where Poe had written ‘The Raven’ in 1845 to remain standing” (Talen *WSID* 95). But his concern was more than that. He regretted that he had not worked to protect other properties, such as a neighborhood eatery, Hakim’s Grill. The owner, Fred Hakim, had spent 25 of his 58 years in his 42<sup>nd</sup> Street neighborhood restaurant which closed in 1997. As his wife said, “There is no room on the same block for Walt Disney’s and ... I’m sorry. It’s a new way. It’s a new world. I’m a realist. It’s over. Take a look at the block. All his customers are gone. It’s finished. His way... The whole way of life is over. It’s the very rich and very poor” (*Gods of Times Square*).

Talen recognized the relationship between the place and communal memory: “By the summer of 2000, I had become aware of the relationship of places to imagination” (*WSID* 95). This was an important connection which, once made, moved Talen to a broader social critique: “The campaign to save Poe House was the first time I ever went to jail for a place” (*WSID* 95). This campaign represented an important intersection between two of his earlier social critiques. One of his charges against Disney was that its marketing process commodified childhood memory, while his primary charge against Starbucks was that every place a Starbucks was built in New York City, some unique place ceased to exist. To Talen, more important memories arise out of neighborhoods and the

personal stories from those neighborhoods. Seeing the Poe House slated for demolition and choosing to fight for a communal memory brought Talen into a new realm of artistic authority; his theatrical performances now underscored the importance of historical artistic continuity. In fighting for the Poe House, he composed an artistic expression that joined the art of New York's past to that of its present, bypassing the commodified, franchised New York that he opposed.

Talen's Edgar Allen Poe project began in the summer of 2000 with his awakening to the threat to the Poe House by New York University, which intended to tear it down. His appreciation of Poe's work centered on what he saw as Poe's willingness to understand and accept death, and then to return and share the darkness with his readers. That work, he argued, provided "a cathedral of Godsightings in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (Talen *WSID* 95). Poe was, Talen argued, "so gloriously Odd; he encouraged the personal visions that we would call Godsightings in our comic church" (*WSID* 95). Talen's immersion in Poe's work added a new layer of complexity to Reverend Billy: "I found myself wanting to become resurrected. ... I was looking for my own light... So I became a worshiper in the Church of Poe! ...I became what I think Poe would've wanted had he written about a sidewalk preacher" (*WSID* 105).

Armed with an intense appreciation of Poe's "personal vision" and a strong desire to add nuance to his own argumentation through Poe's

work, Talen began to preach for the preservation of Poe House, searching out places within the city that he described as Poe-like and achieving some “Poe moments” (Talen *WSID* 105). Because he seized these preaching opportunities without city permit, he was arrested throughout the summer and fall and taken to the Tombs several times. At one point, he “found a key to the back door of a Judson church in my desk” (Talen *WSID* 105), giving him direct access to the scaffolding around Poe House. He and twenty-five members of his choir climbed the scaffolding with music, signs, and costumes, and read *The Raven* to the crowds below. To the Tombs he went again; this time he went in despair of ever achieving his goal, of finding sense in his own mimicking of Poe’s characters, or of saving Poe House. By this time, he realized that Poe’s characters surrender to the unknown and with that surrender were able to look back at life and see it clearly from the darkness. This vision of life, he recalls, took the form of a young black man who performed a rap version of *The Raven* to him in the cool morning light as he left the Tombs (Talen *WSID* 110). He referred to this expression as one of his Godsightings, and his resolve was strengthened.

When in December 2000, he preached at New York University’s Tishman Auditorium against the demolition of the Poe House, he also recorded the work on video, including the walk outside which followed the sermon, in a way which emphasizes police opposition to the protest.



For instance, the video does not show the police shutting down the entrance to the Auditorium, which forced ticketholders to enter through side doors, but Talen remarks on this in order to anchor this as one of the video's themes. Reflecting on this performance, Talen explains that he was ill when he began the service, and he relied on the choir to energize the crowd and carry him forward. The service began with Fractured Vespers, flowed into a Credit Card Exorcism, and was followed by the Induction of the Saints, including Suzanne Dickerson, Michael Deas, and John Jurayj, each of whom had contributed knowledge, time, and commitment to save Poe House. When the sermon finally came, it first invoked Poe, then Talen laid out his work of the last few months, including his sermons, his challenge to NYU, and the young rapper whom he met at the Tombs. Afterwards, while leaving the auditorium, the crowd of about 300 (tenant. net), Talen, and the Choir chanted "Save the Poe House" to an audience of "TV crews who were making documentaries that night, a group of Vancouver 'culture jammers,' and the BBC [who] were waiting outside" (Talen *WSID* 111).

As they walked, we see the audience and Talen reading *The Raven*, with people of the Village reciting what they knew of the poem and shouting, "Nevermore," as they passed. He described himself to the news crews, "My name is Bill Talen. I do this character called Reverend Billy" and explained that he was the leader of the rally. The evening

ended when a police officer asked Talen for his sound permit, arrested him, and returned him to the Tombs. Both local television and a German television firm filmed the arrest, which he described: “I had the classic perp walk. I was getting in touch with the evening news. And then we went into the van, we went down 100 Center Street. .... This was my second arrest so I suppose that is why the criminal trespass charges were 5-15. You know just a little bit more serious. And it wasn’t just performance art anymore for these people.” When members of the rally questioned Talen’s arrest, one police officer said they could “arrest somebody for jaywalking” (Post, Palacios, and Talen).

At his arraignment, he writes, “My Legal Aid lawyer argued before the judge that I had already done my community service by acting to defend Poe House” (Talen *WSID* 112). Talen then went home to sleep off his illness, the raucous performance at Tishman Auditorium, and his trip to the Tombs. The next day, a Monday, the Historic Districts Council announced that a compromise had been reached to save Poe House by incorporating its façade into the structure of the new building which NYU was designing. In addition, a “Poe” room would be constructed with a separate side entrance so the room could be experienced as a space in which Poe lived and wherein one could read his poetry.

Talen took little time to rest and savor his success with the Poe House because Christmas season was upon him, and he did not want to

miss this opportunity to assail his adversaries, the minions of Disney. In mid-December, 2000, he again performed and preached at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Disney store. “We are all in hell now – can you feel the evil? – and Mickey Mouse is the Anti-Christ,” he boomed, according to Penelope Green, of *The New York Times*, as he wrote, “He worked quickly through his talking points that the Walt Disney Company’s colonization of Times Square had destroyed local businesses; that its labor practices were questionable, according to a watchdog group, ... and that a preponderance of Disney characters and stories was ‘robbing children of any kind of unmediated<sup>87</sup> childhood experience.” Before this action, Talen told Penelope Green, “Doing politics like this, on a very modest level, I sometimes get embarrassed by how modest it is. ... [T]here isn’t a successful model for mass change. ... In the absence of change working on a macro scale, I keep returning to what’s happening in my neighborhood”. For his work with Reverend Billy throughout the year, The Village Voice awarded Talen a Special Citations award in 2000 (villagevoice.com).

In March, 2001, Talen prepared for *Reverend Billy’s Spring Revival*. Of this project, Robin Eisgrau wrote, “The Reverend Billy is on a crusade to save the civic soul of New York City. ... [He mixes] entertainment with a sense of social urgency. ... He uses the trappings of a revival meeting

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<sup>87</sup> This statement is problematic because there are no truly “unmediated” experiences.

to address community matters.” The Revival ran for five Sunday nights at the 45 Bleeker Street Theatre, presenting a different social or political issue each night:

Mar 11 Viva Charas! Viva Poe House!

Sainthood for Chino Garcia and David Goldfarb

Mar 18 WBAI/ Media Ownership Oligarchy

Sainthood for Amy Goodman

April 1 They Paved Paradise & Put Up a Shopping Mall:

Hudson River Park SCAM!

April 8 Magical Children's Garden vs. Luxury Tower on  
Ludlow

April 15 EAST VILLAGE FRANCHISE-FREE ZONE

Starbucks Wants Wmsburg (tenant. net).

According to Kalb, Talen’s theatre was one “bellwether of a possible renaissance of guerilla theatre” as “[e]ach of his ‘church services’ next month will culminate in a group march out of the theater, to commit a political action on the theme of the night” (“Spring Theater”). Committed to political action, Talen would then move his services from the theatre and into politics each night during the Revival. According to Kalb, “Reverend Billy's is a much savvier kind of radicalism than anything you

would have seen in the '60s. You don't expect this sort of community cohesiveness in acts of civil disobedience in this day and age. ”<sup>88</sup>

When Eisgrau attended the Revival, on March 18<sup>th</sup>, “crucified Mickey and Minnie Mouses” adorned the stage. The Church raised Amy Goodman and Bernard White to sainthood; the choir read passages from Mumia Abu-Jamal and Noam Chomsky; and an exorcism of the audience’s credit cards was performed, Mother Dee Spencer conducting the choir (tenant. net). Bill Henry, as the musical director for the Church, composed the songs; James Solomon Benn sang a “breathtaking solo” of “Swooshes<sup>89</sup> and Mickey” (tenant. net). Political actions, centered on the political issues of the sermon, followed most services (tenant. net).

In the final Revival service, Reverend Billy also raised Habib of Habib’s Place, whose rent has been raised from \$1,000 to \$3,000, to sainthood (rtmark.com). This last Revival included a cyber attack on Starbucks by the congregation and was termed a “Virtual Sit-In” (rtmark.com). Word of this leaked out, and in the hours before the attack was to occur, Talen’s ISP, el.net, “was threatened with the ‘blackholing’ of all of its websites” (rtmark.com). This would effectively put el. net out of business and disrupt the web operations of all of el.

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<sup>88</sup> Murad.

<sup>89</sup> The term “swooshes” is in reference to the logo of sportswear giant Nike’s logo which is an elongated oval shaped in a way which evokes a running shoe.

nets customers, as all internet traffic to el. net's servers would be blocked. "Producers of *'The Church of Stop Shopping'* [worked] to find a new host for the website so that the action [could] forward as scheduled" (remark.com). The attack took place from midnight on April 15<sup>th</sup> through midnight on April 16<sup>th</sup>, in conjunction with the Revival's presentation of *East Village Franchise Free Zone*, in which the congregation used "hactivist" software available on revbilly.com against Starbucks Corporation's website (rtmark.com). The software was designed by "Electronic Disturbance Theatre, which is identified with the cyber-zapatista movement" (rtmark). Their representative, Ricardo Dominguez, attended the service and explained how to use the software with the intent of slowing "down Starbuck's ability to reply to its internet customers" by overtaxing their servers (rtmark.com). Talen's troupe sent out emails to "tens of thousands of people throughout the world" (rtmark.com), in order to bring Starbuck's servers down.

During this period, Bill Talen also served as part-time faculty with The New School University, a "legendary, progressive university ... bound by a common, unusual intent: to prepare and inspire its more than (sic) 10,200 undergraduate and graduate students to bring actual, positive change to the world" (newschool. edu). Talen's DVD, *The Church of Stop Shopping*, documents his work at the University which allowed him to train other political and artistic activists. In his Master Class, "Political

Performance,” in December, 2000, he first instructed his class in the details of Disney’s sweatshop labor, sounding more like an instructor of Sociology than of drama:

The CNH Fabrick Factory in Sri Lanka is under lock and key 24 hours a day and is completely inaccessible for public inspection. Long hours, forced overtime, 7 day work weeks, and 12 hour regular shifts. It is not uncommon to be locked in the factory overnight. Minimum wage is even less than the legal limit in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka it is 19 cents an hour but the arithmetic comes out to 16 cents an hour. While Eisner earns \$330,000 in that same hour.

(Post, Palacios, and Talen)

Of the oversized Mickey and Minnie Mouse Dolls in the classroom, Talen noted that he was ashamed to say he had purchased them at the Disney Store and hoped that Disney regretted selling them to him, adding, “We will return with them on crosses,” referring as he often did to the blunt iconography of his performances at this time.

Once briefed, the class left the classroom and performed an action at the Disney Store in Manhattan. They chanted as they marched, “Boycott the sweatshop company Disney” and “Stop shopping this Christmas” (Post, Palacios, and Talen). He challenged “neutral observers, passersby” to boycott chain stores and to find out what companies use

sweatshop labor, declaring that “when you abuse people on the other side of the world, they abuse us here” (Post, Palacios, and Talen), referring to the September 11, 2001 tragedy. He called for the retail loop of oppression to be broken by the refusal to purchase transnational goods. He then notes the bleakness faced by the people of New York when the only way they had to express themselves now is by spending money. When one of the passersby declared, “You are horrible actors,” Reverend Billy replied, “Thank you.” On the way home, he speaks directly to the camera, telling his interviewer and audience, that he has no analysis of his performance: “It might not have been brilliant acting” (Post, Palacios, and Talen), but he just wanted to get the information out there. The delivery of that message alone made the action worthwhile.

Before the class began performing the *Cell Phone Opera*, Talen warned them, “They may have the authority to kick you out... [but they won’t] if all you’ve done is talked on a cell phone in a critical way about their product.” Before entering the store, he called them to prayer: “I want to address the part of the sky which is not yet covered with logos.” Throughout the performance, Talen can be heard calling out to his class and audience: “This is the high church of retail,” “Ground Zero of Evil,” and this action is about “these neurotic little tchotskies.”

To the camera crew and the future video viewer, he said, “This is wrong. It’s good to be here to remember what is wrong.... This is evil.



We need to start our own church that isn't about...the commodified moment." Then he continued, "My life isn't a Disney Production." As he left, he thanked his shopper audience: "Thank you for coming to *The Church of Stop Shopping* today," adding, "That's my curtain." Outside he continued, talking first to the camera crew, "Let's use the Disney store as our backdrop," and then to the audience, "All of this is commodified. ... We are turning into a society of extras from Dawn of the Dead. ... Both ends of the labor loop need each other" (Post, Palacios, and Talen). In his review of the action, which he shared with the class immediately following the performance, Talen noted, "We were able to contact lots of tourists, maybe 3-400, maybe more. ... They heard an objection to the Disney Company's value system ... which for a lot of them was totally surprising." The delivery of that message alone made the action worthwhile, according to the Reverend. After Talen proclaimed to the crowd, "I think this is the 28<sup>th</sup> Church of Stop Shopping action," the audience corrected him—this was the 29<sup>th</sup> performance.

With regard to his own performance, as a part of the political performance course he was teaching, he added, "I don't have an analysis of my performance. It is so highly charged. You end up doing the best you can. ... I might have lost my character... It might not have been brilliant acting, but I think it's about getting the information out there" (Post, Palacios, and Talen).

## **The commons on an uncommon day**

As we know, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, dawned as a beautiful day in the City and ended with approximately three thousand deaths in New York City as the World Trade Center Towers burned and then collapsed. In *Up Front: American Theater Reflects on the Events of September 11*, Talen discussed the days and weeks following the bombing. One of the first things he noticed was people “*really* listening to each other. Crying and laughing” (Hanlon et al 20) and then people beginning to reclaim public space, without thinking about it, without the help of protest leaders, or clowns, or fools. Talen described the day and the aftermath of the attacks as a period in which the outside forces that shaped New Yorkers’ lives simply fell away: “[P]eople were just not noticing the advertising, the surveillance cameras, the corporatizing of public space. People were just not noticing the supermodels bending down over them from the buildings” (Hanlon et al 20), as “people in the hallways, on the sidewalks, on the streets, in the parks were looking each other in the eye. ... An amazing reclamation of public space was taking place before my eyes—a utopian idea for lots of us who have been working on just that project” (Hanlon et al 20).

Talen was drawn to Union Square:

First of all, there is a natural stage there, and there is a peace march there every day. ... But also because of its

history, the May Day celebrations, the general strikes of the sweatshop workers almost a century ago. The location there of the Socialist and Communist Party offices, the location of the first bank that was created with money from working people, the Amalgamated Bank. ... I started performing there, two or three times a weekend. ... The mallizing of Manhattan has been reversed suddenly. ... Because I got the feeling that people felt the tragedy, but were not objectifying it, therefore making possible an on-purpose continuation of this wonderful rehumanizing, renarrating of public space. (Hanlon et al 20-21)

When, in the aftermath of the bombing, Talen became “fused” with the character Reverend Billy, when he in effect became Reverend Billy, and took up the mantle of pastor, his Church also changed. Both these things followed quickly after the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy. As he observed, “[O]ne effect on my work is that the goofy, the ironical, wink-wink frame around me in the first few minutes of the interactive play, the comic church service, is disappearing” (Hanlon et al 21). After the bombings, Talen found a certain freedom to speak as he had not been able to before. Gone was the struggle to find “a post-ironic place where something like a secular spiritual moment is possible” (Hanlon et al 21).

As he saw it, much was now “understood because of the bombings” (Hanlon et al 21).

September 11<sup>th</sup> altered not only Talen’s relationship to his character, Reverend Billy, and the form of his performances, but it also reminded him of the necessity to present a complex, nuanced, open debate within his work. He was particularly moved by a discussion of his Disney Store retail intervention work by a group of firefighters on the evening of September 11, 2001. In an interview recorded on his *Reverend Billy and The Church of Stop Shopping* DVD, Talen described the setting, the conversation, and the importance of this event:

I got a call the other day from a lady who said you know I was in a bar on the Jersey side of the Hudson River, late on the night of September 11<sup>th</sup>. And 4 or 5 firemen kind of fell into the bar after having worked all day and into the night and they were completely dazed by their experience. People gathered around them protectively, bought them drinks off the top shelf, and they were getting drunk on purpose. And they really had frightened looks on their faces. And they had to share what they had been through with the people that were there. One of my Disney Store invasions was suddenly on the television and my friend told me that the bar went quiet as one by one people

started watching this invasion of the Times Square Disney Store by a group of forty or fifty people. When it was over, they started talking again and my friend told me that the kinds of conversations that they had were surprisingly open to the notion that there's something wrong with what our transnational corporations do to us. They were able to think that we can ask if there something wrong without necessarily being supporters of Osama Bin Laden. And that remains to this day, five or six months later, that remains the question: Can you hope for social change without being categorized as some sort of anti-American type? These firemen have taught me a lesson: Can I be that open? I have to be that open. If I am not as open as they were that night. I don't even know how they did it. Apparently they had like a town hall meeting in this bar where they really wondered about, openly discussed-- our companies are all around the world and our military is defending them and we call that democracy. We call the ability to sell Coca Cola and McDonalds, we call that democracy. Is it democracy? Is that really democracy? Maybe we should think about this again. If they were really doing that on the night of the 11<sup>th</sup>, I mean that is an

inspiration to me to be open and not go for the easy answers. When you just start going for easy answers then you just become more predictable and more (less) compelling to people that might listen to you. (Interview with Bill Talen in Post, Palacios, and Talen)

Because of the time he spent with the people in Washington Square, Union Square, and Tompkins Square after September 11<sup>th</sup>, Talen now felt it was possible “to tie the shrines of mourning and the wonderful evenings ...” after September 11<sup>th</sup> to his future performances (Hanlon et al 21), envisioning marches to and from his performances which would culminate in opening up public space, trying to get people to remember what has happened” (Hanlon et al 21).

Reverend Billy, it seems, had now looked outside of his own neighborhood toward the global reality: “The hope that we can defend our own neighborhoods against overwhelming commodification is tied to our hope that our foreign policy does not have to be violent” (Hanlon et al 21).

## CHAPTER IV

### BECOMING REVEREND

#### **Reverend Billy Talen**

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center Towers, Talen went into the City, not to perform, but to talk and to listen. Even though he planned no performance, he dressed as Reverend Billy. Many New Yorkers recognized him on the streets and on the subway, had seen his anti-consumerist performances, saw sincerity in his words and performances, and were eager to talk to him about the collapse of the Towers. Talen argued in his interview with Hawthorne that many of his fellow New Yorkers were living post-religious lives, meaning that there had been a general decline in their religiosity both in collective and in private forms. Further, he said, “[People] ... had not been in a church or mosque or synagogue since they were young, but after 9/11 wanted to have a pastor in their community” (Hawthorne). Undertaking this role of pastor, Talen offered himself to the many people who, being “basically post-religious,” had no relationship with a “pastor,” and, therefore, no relationship with a person trained to provide spiritual care. In effect, there was an increase in need for spiritual nurturing after 9/11, but the people that Talen met with had little experience with contemporary religions or the spiritual sustenance they might provide. This created a vacuum which Talen understood and to which he was

drawn. When he went into the streets of New York City dressed as a pastor, he would “listen and make suggestions about coping and just reflect on 9/11, what had happened” (Hawthorne).

The moment that Talen walked into the streets of New York, dressed as Reverend Billy, to offer spiritual support to those struggling to cope, searching for meaning, or hungry for guidance, he was no longer solely a performance artist. On the continuum of non-acting to acting, he moved sharply in the direction of non-acting. Reverend Billy, to the extent there is a continuum between character and personhood, veered sharply in the direction of personhood. Talen had assumed the pastoral role of Reverend Billy, in effect, becoming pastor to a post-religious flock. Reverend Billy had little of his bombast that day as he sat and quietly listened to the personal struggles of the people to whom he offered support. This person, who held the hands of the distraught, and debated patiently with the troubled, was not Reverend Billy, the anti-consumerist preacher, nor was it Bill Talen, the performance artist; this person was a confluence of the two. This was a fresh persona who embodied Talen’s artistic, political, and poetic sensibilities and Reverend Billy’s ability to grab public attention and channel its post-religious spirituality toward critical social concerns. I tend to think of this joined persona as the Reverend Billy Talen, as the name captures the contributions of both entities. For the first time Reverend Billy Talen reached out to his flock



and consoled them over the trauma of three thousand lost souls, a jagged landscape, and an unstable future. Talen acknowledged this, saying that immediately after 9/11 he “fused with the character.” The character was no longer a character and Talen’s view of his life’s work permanently changed.

Talen, now a pastor with a flock to tend, thus entered a new performance phase, changing his performances, his methodology, and his audience. From 2001 forward, Talen, as Reverend Billy, extended his outreach. He performed both on stage and on film. He gave interviews, published books, produced films, videos, an audio CD, and began to tour. He joined other activists in ways that gave his voice renewed energy and purpose while remaining anchored to a theatrical blend of social purpose and comedic exposé. He remained true to the tenets of his church and the preacher he had crafted. He had worn the Reverend Billy character so often-- adopted his voice, his clothing, his beliefs, so often—that a change in Talen’s performance was almost imperceptible. Perhaps this change is not to be seen in Talen’s performance of Reverend Billy, but in his non-performance of the Reverend. Talen, wearing the garb of the preacher, gave interviews about his work, social pressures, and his life. He no longer acted outside his role as pastor to his flock. *Other Love*, a comedic sermon, was written at this time. This monologue allowed Talen’s fused persona to perform a new theatrical piece, in effect,

giving the Reverend Billy Talen an opportunity to perform Reverend Billy, further eroding the border between character and self.

Furthermore, Talen's greater appreciation of the extent to which his effort to stymie the transnationalization of public space changed his understanding of the work that must be done. If the economic structure necessary to create a global system of eateries, big box stores, and franchises is such that it would provoke an attack on the very neighborhoods Talen was working to protect, then Talen's work would also have to develop a more intensely global structure. Reaching such a worldwide audience, however, must have seemed daunting to Talen, especially considering his appreciation of his own "modest" approach to politics.

In addition, funding his work, his annual campaigns, and daily needs was challenging. Talen's did not fit easily into traditional categories, which might have earned him support either from the arts or from political sources. Talen's wife, Savitri D, shares his passions, and works with the troupe as both choreographer and director. Savitri D moved from Charlottesville to New York in 1997 hoping to find opportunities for dance and theatre, as reported by Courtney Stuart in *The Hook*. Savitri had been one of the original members of the Zen Money dance troupe. What she found was an opportunity to direct Reverend Billy and his growing choir in numerous actions in New York

and around the world. Talen and Savitri D met in a theatre elevator, says Dee, who described her as “the organizational spirit and emotional groundwire for Talen.” Savitri D told Stuart their actions “typically happen once a week. They pay their rent by teaching at a number of universities, while tours are funded primarily by donors” (Stuart). Dee credits Savitri with the organizational skill that moved Talen from “crude iconography” to “broadcasting a sermon fortnightly on National Public Radio...” and to “Spat Theatre,” wherein his disciples argued loudly in stores about the social irresponsibility of the stores’ corporate owners. Savitri explained to Stuart, “We are too political for most arts funding, but not mainstream enough to get political funding.”

With no model to follow and limited resources, Talen allowed his strong personal commitment to drive him forward, working to take his message beyond his neighborhood. He used the resources at hand to budget and structure campaigns that would effectively broadcast and amplify his message. The challenge Talen faced is common to most forms of protest. In general, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to arrange the financing necessary to campaign globally, whether through site specific performances, or through the media. For this reason, protests, including protest performances, are typically enacted by those of modest means against monolithic power.

Fortunately, Talen, through television, the internet, and social networks, had many opportunities to see protest performance that broke through the restraints of limited resources. Those performances used similar technologies to bridge the gap between audience and performer. Baz Kershaw in *The Radical in Performance* cites the 1996 Greenpeace occupation of the Brent Spar oil rig as a “remarkable amplification of the performative principles of contemporary global protest, showing the protesters had skills in the use of technologies of survival and communication every bit as sophisticated as those developed by the international corporations they were attacking” (*Radical* 124).

Greenpeace, utilizing television to amplify their message, made use of modernity’s ubiquitous communication networks to broadcast their performance and reach a global audience. However, Greenpeace has both a global network of protest performers at its disposal and access to a significant income stream provided by sympathetic members of its audience. Other protesters, of more modest means, have also used television and film to swell the number of their supporters. In 1997, a group of protesters tunneled “live-in burrows beneath the planned paths of the Newbury Bypass and the second runway for Manchester Airport” (Kershaw 124). “[T]he British popular imagination [was] running riot, perhaps in an excess of admiration of the inverted ingenuity and sheer resistant determination of the protesters,” writes Kershaw (*Radical* 124).

Further, the fact that “one of the chief subterranean radicals turned out to be a quietly spoken, shyly inarticulate smiler who had rechristened himself ‘Swampy,’ added an ironic gloss to the deep threat to the dominant [culture] represented by the subtle extremism of the protest’s imperceptible performativity” (*Radical* 124).

When Talen shifted from neighborhood to global performance, his work demonstrated an appreciation of much that could be learned from Kershaw’s analyses of protest performance. In Talen’s work, we can see his recognition of the camera’s global eye, the ability of ingenuity and determination to sway the audience, and the opportunity for even underfunded performers to confront international corporations. As Kershaw explained, “contemporary protest in a mediatised world almost always assumes an audience, for whom events are ‘played out’” (“Fighting” 260). Like Talen’s work, these protests “are in part shaped by performative considerations. Though they often involve a good deal of spontaneity, they also follow scripts or scenarios” (“Fighting” 97). Talen, having utilized video and the internet in the past, was aware of the opportunities visual and networked media afforded. Over the next few years, he would come to use both the television interview and highly publicized arrests by the police as performance opportunities. Through the television interview he not only performed his protest, but he also mediated the media’s response to his art and message, as to his arrests,

many of which were filmed and, therefore, distributed, viewed, and archived for consumption locally, nationally, and internationally.

His choice to film himself and his Choir went a step beyond even Kershaw's description of the protesters on the oil derrick. Talen, being a performer by trade, made certain that he would be filmed either by news crews or by his own cameras. He did not rely on the fickle nature of the global eye; rather he added his own observational eye to the performance and thereby insured that the worldwide audience would have an opportunity to witness his confrontation with power on his own terms. By these choices, he put himself on the world stage, without waiting for the audience to find him.

Before beginning a discussion of Reverend Billy Talen's post-September 11<sup>th</sup> work, it is important to touch on the concept of parody. Beate Müller, in *Parody: Dimensions and Perspectives*, spoke of the complexity of parody, and determined, "A certain agreement rules on only three points; two of them are combined in the term 'comic intertextuality'. This term implies that a parody has a certain comical effect and refers to another text, genre or style. A third widely accepted point is that the original earns scorn and derision in the process" (Müller 237). My review of Talen's work leads me to conclude that his early work, with Reverend Billy, could be called parody. Certainly it relied on comic intertextuality and, even though Talen's work always contained a

social or political message, in the beginning there may have been pleasure in deriding the televangelist and expectations that the audience would join him in scorn. In those early days, Talen was still dealing with aversion to the religion of his childhood. From September, 2001 onward, however, Reverend Billy became even more engaged with his political message, and the derision of the televangelist eroded, or at least took on a surprising new complexity.

In a 2009 interview with Carmen McClish, published in *Liminalities*, Talen said, “We stopped being mostly-parody after 9/11, when the downtown New York community wanted a kind of fellowship but preferred our non-deistic and funny approach. We were surprised at the baptisms and weddings and funerals that followed” (McClish 2). Nonetheless, Talen found that parody co-existed with his own ‘Fabulous Worship.’: “[W]e especially were surprised to discover how parody can co-exist with truly moving church moments. ... Parody helps make the community... [W]e defend against the object of the parody, the homophobic war-mongering televangelist...” (McClish 2). McClish, however, does not agree with this analysis: “Although I understand Talen’s resistance against this simplistic dichotomy, his persona as the Reverend Billy is not parody, in the traditional notion of parody as a character or event built on critiquing the original” (2).

R. M. Reynolds, in his thesis, "Moving Targets: Political Theatre in a Post-Political Age," finds that, "Rev. Billy seems on the surface to be a political parody" and goes on to say that theories of parody "imply [Reverend Billy's] inability to challenge consumer capitalism" (11). Since Talen's parody is of televangelists, not consumer capitalism, traditional parody theories suggest that Talen's work does not directly confront consumer capitalism, which should render the parody ineffective, as an anti-consumerist challenge. Nonetheless, the performance of Reverend Billy remains parody despite these traditional theoretical limitations. Credit must, therefore, be given to both Talen and Lanier have creatively used and revised the concept of parody, which enabled Reverend Billy to hone, and then redirect, the audience's derision of televangists toward an alternative target.

Reynolds argues that this redirection is possible because "[T]heatrical *actions* may be able to embody contradictions without being reduced to a neutralized imitation..." (12). According to Reynolds, even though Reverend Billy's surface parody lacks a direct focus on the true object of his scorn, a theatrical action is not tied so immutably to the object of its parody. The theatrical nature of the imitation of the evangelist allows for more virtuosity than is available to traditional parody, while the character, Reverend Billy, is obviously parody, according to Reynolds, but he concludes, "[T]he *target* of his parodies is



not the Christian form itself but something external to it: consumerism” (Reynolds 52), suggesting that when Talen and Lanier developed the Reverend Billy character, they either consciously, or unconsciously, recognized that the theatrical nature of their parody would allow them to use Reverend Billy in non-traditional ways.

I am in agreement with both McClish and Reynolds; by the time the NYPD first arrested Reverend Billy in the Times Square Disney Store, the idea of Reverend Billy as a critique of televangelists had long since faded, belonging as it did to the very earliest representations of Reverend Billy. As Reynolds and Reverend Billy agree, the true object of Reverend Billy’s scorn is not the televangelist so much as it is consumerism, as a political necessity and statement. Reverend Billy relies upon his audience’s existing concept of the televangelist and then boldly and brashly expands upon those concepts. In this way, he turns a media sensation, the televangelist, to his own ends. Interestingly, Talen adds complexity to these arguments when he links his parody of televangelists to a search for sincere spirituality: “I don’t separate out the arts from political work. And I don’t separate arts and political work from spiritual work” (Post, Palacios, and Talen). Reverend Billy, as Talen originally crafted him, and as he grew to enjoy a true spiritual calling, embodies all three, art, politics, and spirituality, usually simultaneously.

Talen struggled to find the right mix of performance and purpose, that would combine the successful elements of his past work with a deeper spiritual calling. As will be seen his work was no longer simple parody, even though it contained parodic elements and it was now intentionally spiritual. He imagined new performance pieces, in the form of sermons, which would make his Church relevant in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. In November 2001, Reverend Billy performed these sermons as a series of Sunday meetings at the Culture Project. Alexis Soloski reported that sermons exhibited a weakness of language, in spite of the fact that Reverend Billy's spirit and flesh were committed to the work. Her review described the Reverend at an uncomfortable intersection, trying to performatively convey spiritual necessity, describing Talen's earlier work as "clever and infectious political theatre," something new and problematic appears here:

This new sermon, however, finds the Reverend exploring the global rather than the local, his sect redubbed the Church of Stop Bombing (ne Stop Shopping).

Unfortunately, his take on terrorism and pacifism lacks the off-kilter originality and specificity of his anti-consumerist agenda. ... Consequently, the new show's best moments find Billy distracted from his rhetoric and lamenting Kinko's, Kmart's, and NYU's bulldozing of

Washington Square. With America wrapped up in patriotic fervor--"a red meat moment," as the Reverend has it--it's no wonder Talen has international concerns. But we need his energies at home. After all, brothers and sisters, someone has to stop a fourth Starbucks from opening in Astor Place. (Soloski)

Talen's struggle with his post-9/11 persona speaks to the very "nature of the art," as Kirby noted, specifically because it inhabits a unique borderland. The art that Talen incorporated into his daily life, fused with, and rallied for social causes wavered ceaselessly between acting and non-acting, eroded both character and personality, theatrically redirected parody to attack social ills, and offered spiritual sustenance to those who embraced it. This unique representation, and presentation, challenged not just the purpose and design of parody, but the character of art itself. Talen's work was obviously theatrical in nature, artistic in design, yet it eluded definition within known artistic genres, or even the blending of genres.

The parodic elements in his work, whether they reflected or refracted, were now harnessed to Talen's desire to find fellowship in performance and need to create "truly moving church moments." Further, the sermons testified to the Talen's ability to play within the complex borderlands between not-acting and acting. Talen's work in the

coming months reflected his struggle to merge his new spiritual calling with his activist and artistic roots. As his performances became more politically, socially, and spiritually focused, Reverend Billy Talen became more comfortable with his role as a dutiful leader of his flock, as well as an activist artist.

In December, 2001, just a few month later, Reverend Billy, produced “Reverend Billy’s Peace Revival,” still using the name “Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Bombing” (loisaida). Talen wrote the script and co-starred with “The Welfare Poets,” a group of Afro-Caribbean musicians who opposed neo-colonialism (Deflem 157). This performance was held at the Charas El Bhoio Community Center which was “under attack by developers and the City” (loisaida). Charas’ resident company, “Great Small Works,” joined with Talen and the Poets, “celebrating the long history of this community hub” (loisaida). Reverend Billy had addressed the crowd at the Charas rally in July: “I’ll tell you what God is; God is the absence of gentrification” (Dewan).

Rose Marie Berger, writing for *Sojourner’s Magazine*, reviewed Reverend Billy’s Church of Stop Bombing Christmas show. She noted that this show honored the small businesses disrupted by the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and their aftereffects, and she quoted Reverend Billy:

Children, here's the tough love, here's the sermon:

Corporate-sponsored grieving makes you bomb people.

Too much patriotism makes you Mel Gibson. Too much  
America makes you fly predator drones across  
Afghanistan shouting in 41 dialects, 'We need to bomb you  
but WE ARE NICE PEOPLE!' We in the Church of Stop  
Bombing think that bombing is a sin. It's almost the only  
kind of sin we object to. Well, bombing and shopping.  
They cause each other. —Rev. Billy. (Berger)

This sermon encapsulated much of Reverend Billy's struggle. He recognized the link between local actions and global repercussions. He warned against making patriotism an unthinking passion. He saw the dilemma between shopping, so inculcated in our society, and the need to enforce the delivery of goods, services, and resources. At a 2005, performance at the National War Tax Resistance conference, the Choir was temporarily named the "Stop War Taxing Choir. Reverend Billy worked tirelessly against the sin of bombing as it was designed to coerce participation in an American retail world order.

Bill Talen later explained his reason for changing the name of his church saying, "I like to wake up in the morning and rename the church every day. I'm a white heterosexual male, and if I don't keep changing my church, after a few weeks I'll throw a hand grenade at you in the name of my god" (Hanlon et al 21). That explanation failed to take into account the ways in which the name changes also reflect Talen's

immediate interests and aspirations. When he changed the name of the Church to the “Church of Stop Bombing,” it was not inconsequential.

Talen was debating the relationship between commodification, consumerism, and foreign policy. He said:

The hope that we can defend our own neighborhoods against overwhelming commodification is tied to our hope that our foreign policy does not have to be violent. If we continue shopping the way we have, our foreign policy must be violent. Dreams and guns are the exports that go hand in hand and seem to need each other. So we're still saying "Stop Shopping" but the name of the church has shifted to "The Church of Stop Bombing." (Grinwis, et al, 21)

The name of the Church, *The Church of Stop Bombing*, did not last for long and it reverted to *The Church of Stop Shopping*. Perhaps, if bombing and shopping were two sides of the same coin, it was best for Talen to address his audience on a matter familiar to them. They could conscientiously change their shopping habits, perhaps more easily than they could halt their country's violent tendency to support consumerism. The debate on the name of the Church, reflected Talen's effort to find a way to address the global nature of his quest for peace. He was not just

looking for neighborhood peace, or if he was he now considered the entire planet his neighborhood.

One such neighborhood might have been located in Sydney, Australia. A brief article in the Sydney Morning Herald, in April 2002, suggested that “a local parish of New York’s Reverend Billy and *The Church of Stop Shopping* would make a fine starting point” for a campaign to be launched against Starbucks (“Spike”). The article stated that Starbucks outlets were “cropping up all over the place,” which threatened Sydney’s rich heritage of independently owned coffee shops, those that serve unadulterated espresso in crockery without gratuitous flavouring.” The Reverend’s message, while struggling with its anchored immediacy in New York City, did gain the attention of the global audience, especially in areas under gentrification attack, whose people feared the tidal wave of identical details.

The mantra Talen used to preach against Starbucks voiced his primary social arguments:

This Starbucks entrance, not a place of origin.

No.

This is a hole of New York-lessness.

I know in my body that this isn’t New York.

And children . . . The Plan Was the Body,  
wasn’t it?

Everybody help me now by saying it together,  
but let's say it in the present tense, give it more  
juice.

The Plan *Is* the Body.

The Plan *Is* the Body.

The Plan *Is* the Body.

I have to back out to Ninth Avenue.

Back out to the Greatest City in the World.

Amen.

This chant argues two points, one quite clearly, that where Starbucks exists, New York does not. Talen's point is that a hole is torn in the cultural and social fabric that is New York City when a Starbucks is built. The doorway of Starbucks is the lip of the hole and anybody entering Starbucks is simultaneously leaving New York City. Conversely, exiting Starbucks allows one to re-enter the "Greatest City in the World."

The second point is not likely immediately clear to his audience, and, perhaps, not clear to his troupe. The statement "The Plan *Is* the Body," harkens all the way back to his days as a poet and student at San Francisco State, when he recited this Creeley poem. In my December, 2011, interview with Talen, he explained his interpretation of the poem, and how it applies to performed activism:



“The Plan is the Body” is an extraordinary statement by Robert Creeley. ... [It] says that we already have the solution in us and the design is stated by the life that we are living. ... We are often trying to invent something like that, Machiavellian solutions, cleverness, in fact, it is us (Talen *Interview*, see Appendix).

In this interview, Talen described the “life we are living,” as something which grows from the mass of protesting bodies, and which can then be “aimed” at the object of the protest (Talen Interview, see Appendix). When the life the protesters live is sufficiently large, and purposefully aimed, it becomes a “devastating form of protest” (Talen Interview, see Appendix).

When Talen’s protest shouts, “The Plan *Is* the Body,” within the same sermon—shouted, sung, and preached to his audience—he is aiming the mass of his protest, their bodily presence, at Starbucks for the tattered holes it is tearing in the cityscape of New York City. Since it is quite possible Talen’s audience is not familiar with Creeley’s poem, I assume, that the chanting of that familiar poem during the height of the protest, as the crowd is being buffeted by police waiting to arrest, or disperse them, serves to strengthen Talen’s commitment to the protest, and sustain his leadership.

**The mission inside the theatre: *Other Love***

Reverend Billy Talen's continued hope for meaning after the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> led him back to more conventional indoor theatre, reminiscent of his years in San Francisco. He wrestled with the many facets and possibilities of peace, or a peaceful reconciliation with the world at large, through a return to theatre and to solo performance. In June 2002, Talen took his new work to the Camden Opera House in Camden, Maine. According to Alicia Anstead, of the Bangor Daily News, Reverend Billy Talen called her from the stage of St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, to promote his upcoming performance. From the church, the room empty of its congregation, Talen began "belting out a treatise he calls 'Other Love' and describes as 'a story of sidewalk rage'" (Anstead). In this work, two men from opposite worlds run into each other on the street and eventually move from rage to a peaceful resolution. "Other Love" is a conversation about love of the Other. Talen asked, "What is peace?" He drew out the word and played with its length and emphasis. "The only thing that matters is peace," he said in "an amalgamated Southern accent" (Anstead). Anstead reports, "The story also is based on an encounter Talen had on the sidewalk in New York, where he bumped full steam into a business [person]. It's feisty anarchist meets purebred capitalist, and the combustion fuels the work" (Anstead).

Joshua Gamson, in his article, "Performance Art: The Gods of Shopping," notes that Talen based "Other Love," directed by Tony Torn

and Savitri D, on the seven sermons he preached on seven Sundays following September 11<sup>th</sup>. Gamson said that Talen argued that “there is a connection between the religiously justified attacks on New York and Washington, the bomb-Afghanistan response taken by the Pentagon, the buying-is-patriotism media barrage, and the corporate takeover of public spaces about which he’d been railing before 9-11.”

In the Village Voice, Jessica Winter’s review of a performance at the Ontological Hysteric Theatre, described the business person in “Other Love” as “. . . the Enemy—a capitalist in a double-breasted suit, yakking on his cellphone. .” (Winter). She describes the play as “a pulpit for a rambling rumination on the war in Afghanistan, a surreal lakeside vision of Billy’s father, and the coyote that wandered into Central Park in 1999. The hapless animal shape-shifts into a “wild dogman,” an image of the Rolex-sporting Other whom Billy is struggling to imagine as a human being with an inner life” (Winter). Her critique of the play is not encouraging; she described Talen’s performance saying:

[T]he huckster oil spill soon thins out into a muddied stream of consciousness: A hallucinogenic episode inside the north tower after the plane hit is badly miscalculated, while the Dad interludes add more puzzlement than pathos. [Talen] keeps returning to that lost, exhausted coyote: something

rare and foreign and unsanctioned that needs to be  
destroyed. (Winter)

On Talen's August, 2002 performance at the Ontological, Ellen Pearlman reported that during this performance "the Reverend did something astonishing." She reports that Talen "ripped off his clerical collar and garb and became his alter ego, the actual actor Bill Talen." In this performance, Pearlman said that she and the audience could feel his pain and vulnerability. Further, Pearlman called this "a brave gamble for any actor renowned as a singular persona." In this monologue Talen spoke about the tragedy of September 11, 2001, recalling "All the I love you's (sic) mouthed into cell phones at that moment were universal I love you's (sic)" (Pearlman). The story becomes sharp when Talen pronounced, "But at some point the I love you's' (sic) turned into one long 'I kill you'" (Pearlman).

In November, 2002, Talen took a revision of "Other Love" to San Francisco under the title "What is Peace?" the *San Francisco Chronicle's* Leba Hertz described this work as a "monologue about the healing process after Sept. 11, 2001," which Talen performed at the Mission Cultural Center.

### **Film as global conversion**

This period in Talen's career took advantage of his early appreciation of film as a way of extending his audience. Over the next several years he would appear in several films and appear on numerous television interviews. Jill Sharpe released her film, "Culture Jam: Hijacking Commercial Culture." The world premiere of this film was on November 14, 2001, according to Canada's *The Guardian* ("Vision TV Film"). It featured segments on The Billboard Liberation Front, Carly Stasko, and Reverend Billy, according to a review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* by Mick LaSalle ("Film Clips"). The review describes culture jammers as "prankster artists who rage against the advertising machinery of commercial culture" (LaSalle "Film Clips"). The Billboard Liberation Front, acting since 1977, modifies the language and images of billboards to deconstruct their meaning, or to present an alternative view. The segment devoted to Reverend Billy shows his confrontation with Disney, both in the retail store and outside of Disney-sponsored Broadway shows. Not unexpectedly, Reverend Billy encourages passersby to boycott Disney, and the piece culminates with his arrest (LaSalle "Film Clips").

In 2002, Dietmar Post, Lucia Palacios, and Bill Talen released the film *Reverend Billy and The Church of Stop Shopping*. This documentary film captures a number of Talen's theatrical actions at Starbucks in Astor Place, New York City, in 2000 and 2001. It begins with Reverend

Billy dressing for the action in his apartment and “feeling the spirit ... coming on” as he donned his preacher garb. He shouts, “Hallelujah” and “I got the spirit” as he approaches the front door. It appears that he is building his energy as he prepares for the confrontation between himself and the transnational known as Starbucks. The film follows his interventions, capturing his performances, and challenges to Starbucks occupation of Astor Place, and his arrest after one intervention. As the police lead him out, he announces, “Starbucks is an abusive transnational. They don’t pay the people that cultivate the plants. ... They are anti-labor. ... They are creating a monoculture by turning the land over to the goddamn coffee [corporations]. They are colonializing us. They are taking over our neighborhoods” (Post, Palacios, and Talen). Outside he continued his sermon, with the troupe chanting, “Boycott Starbucks” and condemnation of child labor, including, “No more blood in your coffee” (Post, Palacios, and Talen). One of many policemen preventing his re-entry, says, “Come on. Relax. You’re acting now.” Then he turns to the camera, puts an arm around a policeman, and says, “Here ya go,” indicating that he will now argue some additional points which the camera should capture. Talen notes that the New York Police Department must defend Starbucks, as Starbucks is enmeshed in a political structure which supports its undertakings. Of the customers in Starbucks, Reverend Billy describes them as participating in “a petit

bourgeois ... posing process” and who believe that they are in some sort of “café society or something” (Post, Palacios, and Talen). He continues, “The fact is that this was a place called the Riviera Astor diner. It was a real place. It had famously abusive waiters. We remember it. We miss it. And now it’s a place that has no personality whatsoever. Why go here?” His parting words are, “Let’s go to Barnes and Noble.”

From there he preaches, “We don’t know how to stop chain stores. We don’t know how to stop corporate franchise imagery. We don’t know how to stop the globalizing economy that makes our local economy swim in this sea of identical details. ... We all become tourists in our own lives” (Post, Palacios, and Talen). Of his own work he says, “I’m a mouthpiece right now and I’m very grateful for that. ... I just feel useful. ... Our neighborhoods are becoming decimated and we are figuring out a defense for that” (Post, Palacios, and Talen). Transnational chain stores are imperial powers and, throughout history, opposition to power began by people doing something nervously awkward. Opposition now, Reverend Billy concluded may be “like making a fool out of yourself and being embarrassed. And that’s the first step” (Post, Palacios, and Talen).

When he next proselytized in front of Starbucks, he warned that Starbucks intended to infiltrate Europe, in much the same fashion as it had New York, claiming that Starbuck would put 650 stores in Europe, sharing with his audience his concerns that the local battle was also a

global one. His claim proposed that transnationals need the energy of real neighborhoods like Astor Place which are rich in historical and cultural energy, which is drawn from its vibrant history of theatrical production and political staging. The energy was sufficiently strong enough to feed a variety of transnational stores, he said, pointing out that from where he stood he could see the transnationals: Kmart, a predecessor of Walmart, Starbucks, Gap for Kids, Barnes and Noble, and Kinkos. He railed that Astor Place had become the Bermuda Triangle of retail. His sermon was followed by a rousing anti-java chant-song by the Stop Shopping choir.

This documentary also includes footage from Talen's Master Class at New School University, as discussed earlier, including the class' theatrical/political action in the Times Square Disney Store and his work to save Poe house, which he explains as he prepares for the action, and fits into the larger argument for neighborhood first proposed by Jane Jacobs when she confronted, New York's urban planner, Robert Moses' plans to put highways through many of New York City's neighborhoods and parks. As Talen talks and prepares for these actions it can clearly be seen that he is not Reverend Billy, but as he dresses and prepares for his action, he begins to embody the Reverend. It is almost as if the costume opens a portal to the Reverend Billy's spiritual calling.



The 2008 release of the film, in Berlin, was accompanied by an appearance by Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir in the Summer of 2007, as a part of an “interdisciplinary project on the transatlantic relationship between Germany and the USA, with a special focus on New York” (Post, Palacios, and Talen). The performance by Reverend Billy, the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir, and the Band was a part of the opening ceremony.

Reverend Billy, sporting, a blond-highlighted pompadour, begins his sermon begins with the acknowledgement that all are sinners, and with the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir singing in the background, he tells the audience that they cannot change anything unless they forgive. By reciting the sins of shopping, consuming, failing to recycle, and flying in airplanes, he illuminated the confusion of “consumerism with freedom” (Post, Palacios, and Talen). Certainly, Talen was also guilty of “flying in airplanes,” so I would imagine that his anti-consumerist message allowed him to justify his own need to fly in order to deliver his work, perhaps praying for forgiveness before doing so.

He recalled the breadwinner “trapped in the traffic jam from hell,” (Post, Palacios, and Talen), and he recited the Church’s “Beatitudes of Buylessness” in a chanted song with the Choir for support. The performance concludes with the song “Democracy is Not for Sale” (Post, Palacios, and Talen) As the Choir, and its band, sing and dance,

Reverend Billy plays cheerleader, dancing and singing energetically, engaging and encouraging the audience.

Morgan Spurlock's 2007 documentary film, *What Would Jesus Buy?* stars Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir and records their 2005 cross-country tour. It opens with mock homage to the "familiar god" who tells us to "buy now and pay later" and to "Shop. Don't let the terrorist win" (Spurlock et al. ). The opening scenes are softly lit, as Hans Ten Broeke's sound deft design provides a soothing musical underscore that hints at parody even as it supports the films' visual representations of American consumer culture with a soft religious undertone. Disney fonts are used for visual effect and mimicry. After its gentle opening, the film moves quickly to hard facts about the American consumer lifestyle, reminding the viewer: "Our savings rate is below zero; long-term credit card debt is high; we spend less than one religious or spiritual hour per week, as compared to five or more shopping; [and] three-quarters of Americans view Christmas with more dread than anticipation."

The scenes in the film are separated by Monty Pythonesque animated curtain calls, mixing consumerist images with iconic religious ones. One of the first is an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in which the "sacred heart" is replaced with a white present, wrapped with a red ribbon. Another is a depiction of "The Sermon on the Mount," wherein

Jesus is kicked off the mount and replaced by Santa Claus. In another, the Christ child holds a “Tickle Me Elmo” doll. One image has Christ holding a car in his arms as a shepherd might hold a sheep, while other smaller, sheep-like cars surround him and baaa for his attention. Not unexpectedly, the three wise men bring credit cards. In one animation, as a line of people wait, the devil throws the package or purse carried by each person under a tree with his pitchfork; and he tosses him or her into an abyss to be consumed by an evil beast.

Interspersed throughout the film are interviews with shoppers and families. Some people report their willingness to go broke, if necessary, to give their children high status gifts for the season. One family explains that it is very difficult to know where to draw the line when they have the resources to give their children the toys that they see advertised on television. Some of the interviews are heart-wrenching, such as the one in which a young girl explains how important her clothes are: “You have to buy your clothes at a certain place or you won’t be considered normal. Rumors will spread and that is a bad thing. A really bad thing” (Spurlock et al). Then there is the young mother, Carrie, who reaches her credit limit as soon as she receives a new card and takes the entire year to pay for each Christmas season. She hides her spending from her husband.

A number of experts in the field of psychology and religion offer their insights during the film, explaining the myriad ways in which Christmas has been commercialized and anchored in the emotional core of American life. Dr. Peter Whybrow, for instance, reports that Christmas presents constitute “wonderful opportunity” for commercial interests because they combine “commercialization with true feelings of love and affection” (Spurlock et al). Dr. Steven Nissenbaum draws our attention to the tremendous effort made by parents “to make it seem to children that nobody shops for Christmas. The presents were each made by Santa Claus” (Spurlock et al).

As a representative of Working Families for Wal-Mart, Reverend Andrew Young explained speaking for Wal-Mart, “Well, people have a choice. Are they going to choose lower prices or higher wages. ... There are more people being fed by Wal-Mart than any government in the world. Globalization doesn’t mean that America is losing. It means that America is shifting its locations. That’s not a choice I can make for them. It means that maybe the workers are not making as much in salary, but/and they’re losing insurance, and they’re losing retirement benefits, which only says that nothing is guaranteed anymore” (Spurlock et al). This strange defense of Wal-Mart’s policies is especially ironic, given that Reverend Young was a former mayor of Atlanta and a former United States Ambassador to the United Nations, but when he interviewed for

the film, he was working for Wal-Mart, according to Amy Goodman of Democracy Now.

The film not only focuses on the themes that Reverend Billy wants brought to the audience's attention, such as the nature of gifting, child labor, slave labor, childhood itself, authenticity, and globalization, but it also discussed the relationship between the art and the message: "The performance element came to be totally in service to the message, and the message became the reason for Reverend Billy's being" (Spurlock et al).

In his review of *What Would Jesus Buy?*, David Bezanson, of filmcritic.com, writes, "The most effective moment of *What Would Jesus Buy?* is ... a montage of pictures and home movies from Talen's South Dakota childhood, showing his sisters playing piano and other sane family members. Contrasted with the freakshow of rabid mall rats and shopping addicts depicted in the rest of the film, it makes you wonder what the hell has happened to America" (Bezanson). The images of Talen's childhood evoke memories of a more measured Christmas lived before the invention of Black Friday or Cyber Monday. Those two pre-Christmas extravaganzas are now part of American retail culture, and they are the high points of the fall season for most merchants and many of their customers. The holiday, as a time for introspection, spirituality,

renewal of family ties, and community fellowship, however, is rarely the focus of any serious television reporting.

The CD of *What Would Jesus Buy?* contains several bonus features including segments about Chinese religious persecution and working conditions, a sermon stop in Snow Shoe, Pennsylvania, a public access Christmas special addressing the marketing of products to young children, the performance in St. Mark's prior to the nationwide tour, and the original trailer, and lyrics.

Beyond video, Talen released an audio CD titled *Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping*, in 2003, through Tomato Music. The tracks include "Stop Shopping;" "Come Happy;" "Remove Starbucks and Disney;" "The Beyond Song;" "War Becoming Peace;" and "Thank You." Each song is based on a sermon. There is an additional CD, which contains an additional sixteen minute film, *Preacher Feature*, produced by Kevin Eggers, who composed a montage of Reverend Billy's and the choir's social actions, primarily centered around 2004 and focusing on the then upcoming, 2004, Republican convention. Even though ultimately the clips reflect upon the Republican convention, they do so by shaping the argument against the consumerism which Talen's sees as vital to Republican neo-liberal economic theories. Yet, the play begins with a prayer to the god, whom Talen refers to as the unknown god, and who also appears to reside in the realm of the unknown. In the opening

prayers, Reverend Billy calls upon his congregation to “reach up for the unknown,” to reach above the arches, swooshes and logos. The Reverend’s unknown god, and the unknown in general, serve as a counterpoint to the repetitious presentation of transnational and franchised space, with their well-known logos, brands, products, and designed environments.

As Reverend Billy works with his congregation, training them, with his arms stretched above his head, reaching for the unknown, he tells them to imagine a string that reaches down from the unknown, which can be felt down through his neck. The audience follows his lead, reaching for the great unknown, struggling for a connection with it.

This image, for those familiar with the acting realm, looks much like an acting exercise, wherein the actor imagines a string attached to the top of her head, which extends from the center of the body, along the spine. The string allows the actor to feel a balance in her body and to be able to move loosely because of that vital, confident connection between the body and the environment.

Reverend Billy, loosens his body about his core and trembles, wobbles and quivers, as he opens himself to the unknown, as it reaches down through his neck, into his spine, and inhabits his torso. In this way, he shows his audience that it is possible to shake off the everyday and to engage the freer, bolder world of the unknown.

Once Reverend Billy has freed himself from the known, thereby embracing the unknown, he serves his congregation, sharing with them his insights, which are spiritual, cultural, and political in nature. He argues with passion that stories, with "...a certain amount of unknown," cannot be told in big box stores. With humor, he explains that if you challenge the known "You'll get arrested," and the audience laughs lightly, knowing the Reverend refers to his own arrest record.

Now we, the viewers, scattered across time and space, turn our own thoughts toward the precious unknown, but before we can fully embrace it, the video begins to unfold a series of short clips, which disclose the many challenges we face as we reach "above the logos" and "between the stars." The threat of Republican consumerist values will unfold close to home, Reverend Billy explains that "...Republican are coming to New York City this summer, slowly like B52 strata forces." He then challenges his audience, "We ask ourselves what we can do in our own town—what we can do with our mundane selves."

The video continues showing by example what we can do with our mundane selves. Reverend Billy and his congregation challenges the civic, ordered peace, walking boldly past police lines. He pauses to ask them, "Are we walking into a pen right now?" His question underscores the tension between the known and the unknown, between the everyday and possibility. Each subsequent scene in the *Preacher Feature* is an



excerpt from a larger action, or a church gathering, and each demonstrates the performative nature of everyday living, when it is challenged, by Reverend Billy's troupe, as it seeks a new everyday, and a new perspective. Most of the film is underscored by an evocative blues sound, which becomes most meaningful when the Reverend calls upon his faithful to worship the gods "...we call hot summer." Excerpts include a road trip that challenges the "suburban hush" of a neighborhood occupied by cars, but not pedestrians, the "fake bohemianism" of Starbucks, the need to neutralize the Starbucks register, and exorcise people of their credit cards. Throughout the film the Reverend Billy indicts positions which are seen in the media every day, but are largely unchallenged: "We are persuaded somehow that bombing is security, that racism is crimefighting, that sweatshops are efficiency, ... gasoline prices are called foreign policy, malls are called neighborhoods."

Always, the theatrical can be seen and heard as a tool to carry the Reverend's message. Before leaving the bus to begin an action, he calls to his choir, "Warm up your voices, children," and the choir's voices rose and fell, as they limber up for the songs that will carry a new message to a new audience, this time in a store parking lot, which the Reverend claims as his church. When a store employee attempts to shortcircuit his sermon, asking, "Can I speak to you for a moment?" the Reverend replies, "No, we're in church here." Later he adds, "What are they doing

parking in the church anyway?” Particularly compelling, to me, is the his reflection on the everyday as absurd: “We labor under absurdities. It is not easy to live a straight-forward life.” In this I believe the Reverend informs all of us that would listen, that the everyday social life which we accept as “normal” has been tampered with by forces which we seldom see, but which twist what should be a “straight-forward life” into something absurd, which must be deconstructed in order to find its true essence.

### **On tour, on mission**

In July 2003, The Hemispheric Institute Encuentro’s “Spectacles of Religiosities” was held in New York City. Reverend Billy and *The Church of Stop Shopping* performed at the event, delivering a sermon similar to the ones he performs during retail interventions, on an open air stage. The Institute’s website explains that the nature of the intervention cannot be neatly categorized because it “resists titles like Performance, Man of God, or Anarchist” (Talen and Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics). Though the event featured one of Reverend Billy’s usual church services, the Institute described it as combining a number of performance and religious elements: “In one form, this project is an interactive play, an evening-length church service that seems to evolve from comedy to some sort of secular spirituality” (Talen and Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics). *The Church of Stop*

*Shopping Gospel Choir* sang anti-consumerist lyrics. NYU TV and Media document this performance on a video, *The Anti-Empire, Anti-War Cabaret*. The post-performance discussion was moderated by Jill Lane.

Late that year, twenty-eight days before Christmas, the Reverend and the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir launched a national tour, or evangelical mission, perhaps, to convince people to slow down their shopping. Before leaving, Reverend Billy told his congregation, “We are going across the shop-addicted country... We don’t know what kind of jail we might be in. ... This journey into utter absurdity” (Spurlock et al). In the film, the Reverend appeared energized by an eager anticipation; he looked as if he were about to launch himself into a great unknown and was open to whatever it might bring. His hairstyle was a blond pompadour, his eyes were wild, his televangelist gestures were bold, and his voice filled the room as he charged, “We are addicted, conflicted, consumerized” (Spurlock et al).

The Choir Master, James Solomon Benn, explains that they only chant “Stop Shopping” to get the audience’s attention: “Nobody can stop shopping, but you can have a conscience about your shopping. Think about how it affects other people. Just explore the options. That’s all we ask.” The quandary, between the need to shop on a daily basis and the desire to “stop shopping,” is reflected later in the film when Reverend Billy must fill his bus with fossil fuel in order to continue the journey. At

the gas pump, he goes down on his knees to pray for forgiveness for the choice he made: “I just want to ask the fabulous unknown to forgive us for on this leg of the trip we froze the vegetable oil last night because we don’t have any heat on this bus. I feel like Jimmy Swaggart. ... Forgive me we are back to fossil fuel” (Spurlock et al).

At this point, Savitri D gives Reverend Billy directions before he goes on: “Billy, here’s what I want you to say. ... I want you to go in the other direction about connecting with people. Don’t go to the performance. Let the performance emerge, okay, from a real situation” (Spurlock et al). As it turned out, most of the situations featured in the film provided plenty of opportunity to allow the Reverend’s performance to emerge, without seeming contrived. During the tour, Reverend Billy performed a number of spiritual services, including the laying on of hands, a credit card exorcism, hearing shopping confessions, and a baptism.

After a Tuesday night performance in Oberlin, on December 8<sup>th</sup>, the Reverend’s bus was rear-ended by an eighteen-wheeler in West Unity, Ohio, when one of the buses overheated and before they had time to find a place to pull over and make repairs (WTOL11). Between 25 and 30 firemen responded to a call by State Highway Patrolman Sergeant Kevin Thomas. Bus windows were removed in order to rescue the injured, and a school bus was used to transport those who were not injured to a

nearby hotel, WTOL11 reported. Most of the injured were treated and released from area hospitals, though the director of the film, Rob Van Alkemade, and a choir member, Jerald Goralnick, were flown to Medical University of Ohio in Toledo. The troupe chose to continue their journey after the accident and chartered a bus to perform at the rest of their stops “scheduled in Chicago, Minneapolis, Des Moines, Dallas, Albuquerque, Las Vegas and Los Angeles” (WTOL11).

On the day after the accident, Reverend Billy invited the audience in Minneapolis to accompany him on a trip to the Mall of America, the Reverend offered 100 robes for them to wear as choir members, creating a scene that he felt resembled an “anarchic Mormon tabernacle choir” (Spurlock et al). According to the film, Mall of America has 42 million visitors a year, which is more than all the visitors to the United States Capital, Mount Rushmore, the Grand Canyon, and Disneyland combined.

The chartered bus then stopped in Craer, Iowa, where the group visited a typical “main street.” After Savitri D and the Reverend stopped to buy a sweater from a local independent merchant, to their relief, the sweater was found to be American made. The merchant told them that his store had been operating for over one hundred and twenty-five years, but because of the impact of the local Wal-Mart, he would be going out of business soon. In the past, he said, “Saturday nights, everybody came to

town and we'd be busy. Be here and be busy until 11 or 12 o'clock at night." But as things stand now, he says, "I have two sons and I have not encouraged either one of them to come back to the store" (Spurlock et al).

The troupe travels on and stops at Wal-Mart Headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas, where Reverend Billy preaches to his Choir, and the camera, before holding a mock funeral for the American dream. From there they moved on to perform an exorcism on Wal-Mart. As he led the Choir and cameraman toward the massive Wal-Mart sign, he proclaims: "Let's take the evil into our bodies now. Let the anger come up. We started this country with anger. There is a time for anger with millions of Americans in our bodies. ... We'll give our own gifts." (Spurlock et al). The struggle with Wal-Mart's corporate sign became physical as the group pushed against the sign's base and shrubbery. Reverend Billy lept toward it demonstrating a need to touch the sign, and perhaps to influence its power in some way. It was an awkward moment, but, still, an attempt to confront the "necessary violence," which Reverend Billy sees whenever he confronts organized widespread consumerism.

Later in the film, Talen and Savitri D critiqued the day's performance:

Reverend: Boy that was miserable.

Savitri (laughing): Millions of Americans in our bodies.

Reverend: I thought that perhaps we would start levitating and fly over Wal-Mart and something might happen. All I did was dive into that shrub.

Saitri: You jumped in the shrub. I don't know if anyone hears us, or if they do hear us, they so don't want to hear us. ... I feel a need for what we do. To have some impact on someone soon. (Spurlock et al)

When the group reached Los Angeles, the Reverend, with the choir in attendance, performed a baptism on Roxanne Elizabeth, the infant daughter of a couple who had encountered the troupe during a protest performance and had invited him to bless their child. Reverend Billy did so: "We ask the fabulous creator, the mother father god that is not a product, to come into the soul of this blessed baby. Give this child and give its parents the loving power to not be lost to the mindlessness of consumerism. Amen" (Spurlock et al).

When they reached Disneyland, they wore disguises in order to gain entry, discretely donning their robes once inside. They met on "Main Street, USA" to start their performance. Reverend Billy noted, "We got what Santa gave us and it was what we wanted" (Spurlock et al). As he began his sermon to this surprised audience, he noted that Main Street, Disneyland, was prosperous, healthy, and beautiful, yet, "[t]he Main Streets across America, they're not this prosperous. They're not

this amazing. They are empty. They're shuttered. They're outsourced." He continued, "Everything here, Main Street, USA, is made in China. ... Let's take our magic back to America. Let's go ...shop at home. Let's slow down our consumption. ... We have the magic. The corporations stole Christmas. ... Stop shopping here" (Spurlock et al). The sermon ended with his arrest by the Anaheim Police, mostly in plain clothes, likely so as not to disrupt the Disneyland ambiance with too strong a show of force.

The reach of the completed documentary *What Would Jesus Buy?* is global. It premiered at the South by Southwest film festival in Austin, Texas, and at the Edinburgh International Film Festival (Usborne). David Usborne, of *The Independent*, interviewed Reverend Billy about the film. As a prelude to his write-up of the interview, Usborne noted that the American Shopocalypse may also be nipping at Britain's heels; in Britain too "community is supplanted by shopping malls, ... spirituality replaced by the worship of the credit card, and ... freedom ... is perverted by our enslavement to the addiction of buying."

In another interview, this time with Delphinia Blue, of Art on the Air in May, 2005, Reverend Billy recounted some of the highlights from this tour. He recalled visits to Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota; the Magnificent Mile in Chicago; Wal-Mart headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas; a tent revival in Lubbock, Texas; a Victoria's



Secret store in Flagstaff, Arizona; the Strip in Las Vegas; and finally, on Christmas Day, Disneyland (Blue). These stops highlighted key aspects of Reverend Billy's church. While the Mall of America and the Magnificent Mile in Chicago were targets of his anti-consumerism campaign, his focus on Wal-Mart's abusive labor and business practices revealed the ways they harmed community and working people. The tent revival in Lubbock gave him an opportunity to proselytize; he targeted Victoria's Secret because of its practice of printing "no fewer than one million catalogues ... prints every day" (Usborne). On the Las Vegas Strip, the Reverend and his troupe performed a rolling revival as they cruised the strip waving, honking, and preaching. The incursion into Disneyland gave Talen the opportunity to rap on the gates of Hell and be arrested, events that were filmed and distributed worldwide.

Reverend Billy and The Church of Stop Shopping Gospel Choir performed in conjunction with the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics again in June, 2007, this time in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Two videos document this performance, which was a part of the 6th Encuentro of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics. The forum was titled "CORPOLÍTICAS en Americas / Body Politics in the Americas: Formations of Race, Class and Gender" (Talen *Reverend Billy Preaches*). In this context, Jill Lane interviewed Reverend Billy and Savitri D and categorized their work as "within the tradition of The Civil

Rights Movement, The Liberation priesthood of Latin America and ACT-UP” (Talen et al, *Interview with Reverend Billy*).

Later that year, Reverend Billy and The Church of Stop Shopping appeared at a shopping mall in Kringlan, Iceland. In an article, “Saving Iceland organizes protests in Reykjavik,” an unnamed reviewer for *Iceland Review Online* wrote “The campaign group “Saving Iceland” organized protests against large enterprises and large-scale industrial projects in Iceland yesterday. Protesters carried banners and yelled slogans in the Kringlan shopping mall on Austruröllur Square.” In a filmed interview, in Iceland, Talen said, “If we all go to thrift stores, private intimate economies, if we trade... Hey, that’s a nice suit you have here. Hallelujah. What kind of suit’s that?” To which the reporter replies, “You would want to trade?” Talen took off his white suit jacket and said, “This is the gift economy right here” (octoplasm).

“The power large enterprises have over people is constantly increasing. The enterprises that are now gaining a foothold in Iceland influence all aspects of our lives and base their power on the fact that we are their consumers," said Sigurdur Hardarson, a member of Saving Iceland (*Iceland Review Online*). In a subsequent video, posted by an unnamed poster with the screen name “octoplasm,” Talen is seen entering the food court of the mall and chanting, “Say, ‘No. ’ Do something to save Iceland. Say ‘No’ to Alcoa. ... Say ‘No’ to Alcan. ... No

to the big dams,” but security soon hustles him out of the mall. The backdrop of this protest could have been “any mall” anywhere. The food court in this mall in Iceland is occupied by food vendors such as McDonalds, Dominos, and Subway. When a security guard cornered and pushed him against a wall. Talen asked him to calm down and demanded to be released. When another guard told the crowd that they had no right to be there, claiming the mall was private property, Talen told the guard, perhaps a police officer, “You behave yourself. You are a public servant.”

After the mall protest, Talen spoke to the Save Iceland activists, who were protesting environmental destruction in Iceland, resulting from aluminum mining:

Those rocks, and those birds, those rivers, that weather, that earth is breathing with what we are saying here today, and it will go out through the action channels next week. You are blessed by this energy coming into you from around the world. It will give you your bravery and you will give your bravery back. And so it will grow and grow and grow and so we will live life without aluminum. (octoplasm)

What becomes clear in this footage is that Talen is opposed not just to the placelessness of transnational chainstores, but to the impact of any transnational corporation whose activities destroy community.

### **The written word**

Talen's 2003 book *What Should I Do if Reverend Billy Is in My Store?* is a collection of the work he had done on stage and presented in written form. By means of a loosely strung narrative, this book brings both his message and his actions to life. The title is drawn from a memo issued by Starbucks on how to respond to Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir's performances in New York City. The memo is "an internal memorandum circulated by Starbucks Seattle head office to all New York branches," It was handed to Reverend Billy "after a show by an ex-Starbuck employee" (Talen *WSID*). The book, as with most of Reverend Billy's tales, is in some measure autobiographical as Talen mines his recall of his childhood memories with discussions of the founding of his church, of his sermons, his actions, the effort to save Poe House, his charges against Disney and Starbucks, the importance of neighborhood, and, most importantly, his calling as Reverend Billy. Through Talen's words, we unmask the power of the retail establishment as a stage, and, therefore, we see the importance of seizing its authority and imagery.

Continuing Reverend Billy's book *What Would Jesus Buy?* *Fabulous Prayers in the Face of the Shopocalypse*, published in 2006, is copyrighted by Bill Talen. The author on the book's cover is Reverend Billy, but Bill Talen holds the copyright. This may be because Reverend Billy lacks a birth certificate and other governmental materials necessary to engage in commerce. Nonetheless, Reverend Billy managed to author the book. The *Fabulous Prayers* are not all prayers. There is an explanation of the Shopocalypse for the uninitiated. The explanation is loose enough to require some consideration before settling on Reverend Billy's intent. This chapter describes the looming Shopocalypse as a threat to love, and to all things genuine. The book contains the script material for four seasonal services. In it Reverend Billy ponders the importance of his church spreading to the far corners of the earth. Then he considers that these churches may take many forms and suggests that the journey to similar intervention performances may not take the form of his church. Reverend Billy suggests we reflect upon Sojourner Truth, Crazy Horse, Green Peace, The Yes Men, and the Red Revues, when looking for compatible beliefs (Talen *What Would Jesus Buy?* 76).

The book also contains a "Direct Action Workbook" section outlining retail interventions which the reader may wish to undertake in his own community. These actions include the hiding of recorders in Disney displays exposing unfair corporate practices, the First

Amendment Mob, Guided Meditations within the store, and Shop Lift!, which involves the lifting of materials in the shop above the participants head while praying that the division between consumers and workers be ended (Reverend Billy). It is a thoughtful and practical guide to theatrical, retail intervention.

### **The web as a pulpit**

There is a masterful mix of media and message in Reverend Billy's work. He takes advantage of most of the opportunities available to him. A sermon is just a sermon to a Sunday audience, but it becomes much more if it is put to song, performed before the public, posted on the web, or videoed for distribution to a broad audience.

Throughout 2003, 2004, and 2005, Bill Talen wrote articles for *The Ecologist's* online magazine at theecologist.org. *The Ecologist* has been supporting his message since 2003. Here Reverend Billy has had a forum for his earth-centric, community focused, and anti-consumerist sermons and stories. These articles were usually titled "I'm the Reverend Billy," and normally began "From the Pulpit: We interrupt our regular programming for a moral advisory..." (theecologist.org). In this way he would begin a one-page sermon on the monthly topic. The ideas would be familiar to any of Reverend Billy's devotees. In December, 2004, Talen recommends that there exists a union between Christian Fundamentalism and Corporatism, thereby creating "Double

Consumerism” (theecologist.org). Talen suggests both prayers and actions to combat this and demands the reader “Start thinking. LIVING THROUGH PRODUCT KILLS. Save your souls! Stop shopping!” (theecologist.org). For the sinner, Talen suggests a way to make amends, “Anybody reading these commandments who works in the field of advertising, ... when you leave Saatchi and Saatchi at 6pm, you must dedicate yourself to subverting your day job. ... Please consider the advantages of shame” (theecologist.org).

One superb essay is that of November 1, 2003. This article tells of an action wherein Reverend Billy and *The Church of Stop Shopping* visited a Lawrence, Kansas Wal-Mart. Their theatre was quiet compared to many. The Stop Shopping Gospel Choir members each took a shopping cart and “walked silently and slowly in an unbroken line up and down, down and over, pushing ... empty carts through endless canyons of products” (theecologist.org). When they left the store, the manager of Wal-Mart confronted the Lawrence City bus driver and told her she was not to allow them on the bus as the police were coming. The confrontation with the police was defused though, when the officer said, “Well, our founding fathers did say that every healthy democracy needs a little revolution once in a while” (theecologist.org).

This quiet shopping cart stroll, is called a “Whirl,” says Jonathan Dee in his essay on Reverend Billy’s work. It may be connected with the

work of another performer. In January, 2003, *The New York Times* described two similar actions by other performance artists. The reporter, Constance L. Hays, said, “There is also Andrew Lynn, who created Whirl-Mart last year. He gets a group of people together, everyone with a shopping cart, and they stroll the aisles of Wal-Mart or Kmart, putting nothing in the carts. When store managers tell him to take his protest elsewhere, he tells them: ‘This isn’t a protest. We’re performing a consumption-awareness ritual.’” As to the details of this particular performance, I do not know whether Lynn or Talen conceived of it first, but I can understand its non-confrontational appeal. Another like performance artist, “Ange Taggart, who lives in Nottingham, England, turns up in places like Troy, N. Y. , to go into a store, buy a lot of things, and then return them. She recently filled a cart with Martha Stewart’s hell.”

### **Standing ground in public space**

It would appear that most of Talen’s work takes place in public space, but that term “public space” is complicated, as one of Talen’s most frequent arguments is that what appears to be “public space” is really a privatized commons, such as the shopping mall. It has the appearance of being a common space, owned and shared by members of the public, but it is, in fact, land owned privately, by people or corporations. For this reason when I speak of Talen’s work in “public



space,” I mean those places in which people can be openly seen and heard, as if in the public sphere, yet, I still acknowledge the complex nature of the space, particularly when it is “contested space.” The examples which follow take place in “public space,” which could more accurately be called privatized commons.

### ***Cash Register Stigmata***

During one of Talen’s tours he stopped in a Northridge, California Starbucks for a quick cash register exorcism. Alexis Sottile reported in the *Village Voice* that, according to Talen, as he prayed with one hand in the air and one on the cash register, he was grabbed from behind by “an aggravated Starbucks customer, who witnesses claim was an ex-marine.” Both Talen and the cash register were damaged and “Talen walked away with a bleeding palm, which he and his Church of Stop Shopping choir dubbed the ‘Cash Register Stigmata,’ having apparently been caused by the cash register’s plastic guard. As Savitri D described the charges stemming from Talen’s arrest, “They use violent boyfriend language. ... He’s no longer allowed to stalk the victim, Starbucks” (Stuart).

The arrest resulted in a restraining order barring him from being within 250 yards of any of California’s 1500 Starbucks, or from entering any Starbucks in the United States until 2007 (Sottile). Talen gave his response to this court order in an interview with Amy Goodman of Democracy Now.

Amy Goodman: Are you banned from every Starbucks in the world?

Reverend Billy: Yes, we are very proud of that. It's like winning the Oscar. Morgan might argue with that, but for us and our value system, and our subculture, we got a letter from Starbucks saying that we were not invited in anymore into any of their emporiums of \$5.00 lattes ventes, ever again. Amen.

Amy Goodman: What did you do?

Reverend Billy: Well, we exorcised the Cash Registers. We drive the demon monoculture out of that cash register, Sister Amy. I mean, you got a billionaire at the top of that company and you've got impoverished ... coffee families at the bottom. And we just ask that some of those dollars start blowing in the other direction.

Neither the arrest, nor the letter from Starbucks, would prevent Reverend Billy from performing in their "emporiums of \$500 latte ventes," but it did create a talking point, which allowed Talen to talk about the social justice issues surrounding coffee farming.

***The First Amendment Right to Recite The First Amendment***

Before a Critical Mass Rally on June 29, 2007, Reverend Billy undertook to “educate the police about the First Amendment by yelling it through a bullhorn,” according to Ethan Wilensky-Lanford of the *New York Times*, who also reported that police have been at the events en masse in recent years, on orders of Lieutenant Daniel Albano. He was arrested and charged with two counts of second-degree harassment. On this day, according to Wilensky-Lanford, organizers of the rally said that “there were more police officers than protesters, which [the organizers] estimated at 125.” Attorney Norman Siegel, a civil right lawyer, witnessed the arrest and decided to represent Talen, arguing, “Reverend Billy has a First Amendment right to recite the First Amendment” (Wilensky-Lanford).

Video coverage of the event showed Reverend Billy with his ubiquitous white bullhorn reciting the Amendment, and was uploaded to *YouTube* by *glasbedian*, a pseudonym used by an anonymous poster. At the same time, the New York police are shown videoing the protesters, who are also simultaneously videoed by Critical Mass. The videos show a long line of police motorcycles and capture the accompanying recitation of the First amendment by the Critical Mass bicyclists. Though passersby do not seem to be hindered by the performance itself, significant show of force by the police appears to be a far greater disruption than that created by either the bicyclists or the reciters of the

First Amendment. As the police placed Reverend Billy in the police van, he continued to recite the First Amendment and was kept in jail for twenty hours before being released (glasbedian). The story of Reverend Billy's arrest for reciting the First Amendment was circulated by United Press International, the Associated Press, *The New York Times*, the *Edmonton Journal* in Alberta, *Marketwire*, *National Public Radio*, the *Cornwall Standard Freeholder* in Ontario, and more, according to LexisNexis. In November, the charges against Reverend Billy were dropped (NYT), while the video of the arrest has been viewed on *YouTube* 35,940 times so far.

Reverend Billy was also arrested at the Astor Place Starbucks, during a rally for the Sidamo Ethiopian Farmers attempting to trademark Ethiopian coffee brand names. He was joined by Ethiopian activists, Oxfam, and Global Exchange (revbilly.com). When the Government of Ethiopia prepared to submit the trademark application it found that Starbucks had already submitted one, blocking Ethiopia from securing a trademark on names they had used for centuries. Talen's argument proclaimed:

We are resolute, children, that ancient coffee names belong to the region that cultivated them—not a transnational, corporate bully. Agreements have already been reached in Canada and Europe,

recognizing Ethiopia as the rightful trademark owners.

(revbilly.com)

In order to pressure Starbucks to rescind their action, Reverend Billy prepared a series of actions over the course of the next several weeks and he was arrested again in the second week when the congregation chose to cross the street against police instructions. The arrest came when he reached for the door to lay hands on Starbucks as part of an exorcism. The Choir, however, carried on:

The Choir, disallowed from entering the store, continued to sing from the doorway, passing out information to passersby and people entering the Starbucks, holding fact sheets up to the store window for people seated inside to read.

Reverend Billy was charged with “attempted criminal trespass” and held overnight. Eventually Starbucks withdrew its trademark application, but this withdrawal was deception. The withdrawal was followed by another application filed to counter Ethiopia’s trademark, this time as an application to the U. S. Patent & Trademark Office by the National Coffee Association USA. It just so happened that Dub Hay, Starbucks’ Vice President for Coffee Procurement, and a member of Starbucks’ Executive Committee was on the Board of Directors of the NCA.

In response to these kinds of activities on Talen's part, the Arts and Healing Network presented their 2004 AHN Award to him. They chose him because "[h]is clever use of performance and parody calls into question America's mindless consumption of resources. As such he is a model of an artist willing to take risks and move out into the public sphere to make relevant and important statements" (Arts and Healing Network). In his acceptance letter Talen repeatedly returns to the theme of neighborhood and community, advocating "a return to the radical politics of a healthy neighborhood," by way of the slogan "The Revolution is My Hot Neighborhood!" (Arts and Healing Network). His emphasis in this acceptance is on "artists who still remember their own neighborhood" (Arts and Healing Network), a neighborhood made up of a mixed gathering of souls, whom he describes as "the falafel vendors, the shoe shiners, and hookers, the millionaire lawyers and the homeless, the cabbies and the fry cook" (Arts and Healing Network). The recovery of this unique gathering of people, characteristic of ungentrified communities everywhere, is what drives Talen's work.

Because the loss of such distinctive community character produces a placelessness, he argues that the rejection of placelessness, might bring about peace, perhaps sheltering the residents from the steady cacophony which modernity brings (Arts and Healing Network).

***A Memorial for Jyimytai Damou***

On November 27, 2008, Reverend Billy and the Choir went to the Valley Stream Wal-Mart, in Long Island, and held a memorial for Jdimytai Damou, a customer killed in a stampede at that Wal-Mart in 2008. “America. The consumers. We’re all feeling it at once. We’re telling each other the good news; we don’t have to shop this way anymore,” Reverend Billy told the crowd outside the superstore. Afterward he spoke with witnesses to the fatal incident, including Diana Garcia, who said, “They should have never depended on their staff. They should have the fire department and the police department to control over two thousand people” (teams spider). Then he prayed with the customers, attendees at the memorial, and the choir, “We pray for all of you. Work in safety. Somehow we hope that you bring home enough money that you can have a new kind of Christmas not based on being in debt. A new kind Christmas based on being with our loved ones” (teams spider). He concluded, “Jdimytai, we won’t forget you and we will learn this lesson. Thank you for your life” (teams spider). Thanking Damou for his life does not necessarily mean that Damou gave his life purposefully, but in the loss of his life, Talen saw a lesson that would benefit many. Damou’s death suggested new ways of life, and it was for that that Reverend Billy thanked Damou for his contribution to an important social argument. A Wal-Mart security guard interrupted the memorial and blew out all the candles that had been lit in front of the

store in front of Damou's picture, an act that angered his relatives.

"Please move along and get off store property," he said (teams spider). The store remained open after Damou's death, seemingly unaffected by the tragedy. Even during Reverend Billy's memorial service for him shoppers are seen entering and leaving the store.

### **What he talked himself into**

The process of "becoming Reverend" took many forms over the length of Talen's career. Even though it is hard to document, much of the evolutionary process involved Talen's decades long conversation with himself. While I appreciate the theatrical skill and the stubborn persistence that were necessary to bring the Reverend Billy project to fruition, I also recognize the spiritual journey that Talen himself made. Early video of his sermons against Disney, his appeals to tourists, and his homilies to odd groups of believers demand admiration for his resilience. I still wonder at the courage and purposefulness that must have been necessary to return repeatedly to his message, to his confrontations, and to the careful composition of Reverend Billy in the face of so little social support. There must have been days when he questioned the meaning of his own actions, and tried to imagine how this would advance his long-term goals. In that questioning, long arguments must have grown and gathered strength as the many steps that led to the social validity of the Reverend Billy persona unfolded. The longevity



of this project took a young man uncomfortable with the concept of religion, and taught him how to adopt the poise and mannerisms of a televangelist, how to use the position of “Reverend” in our society to redirect social argument, and finally converted him into a man with a flock looking to him for guidance. The man who initially rejected religion accepted its place in everyday life, accepted the communal need for a leader they could call “Reverend,” realized the importance of his clerical collar, and channeled his audiences need for social leadership into an understanding of civic spirituality. This development took many years, during which time Talen slowly changed many of his core beliefs. Certainly Lanier was critical to the external arguments that Talen pursued, but it was vitally necessary for Talen to work through each step of his, and Reverend Billy’s development, and eventually to clarify the importance of Reverend Billy’s social and theatrical spiritual energy. This energy eroded the borders between character, activist, and spiritual leader.

The porosity of the roles which allowed the social activist to blend, fully and seamlessly, with his theatrical creation, earned Reverend Billy a great deal of social capital. Talen’s social critiques became widely known, and difficult to ignore:

Word about Talen's crusade has been spreading. His actions  
--- and especially the times he has been dragged away by the

cops - have become popular postings on *YouTube*, the video-clip web site. Everyone in the US Congress is aware of him too, because he was there just last week, gleefully taking the name of the Lord in vain in the great rotunda with his choir, where they performed their First Amendment hymn. This hymn was also sung in the congressional cafeteria and even inside the offices of senators such as Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. (Usborne)

All of which demonstrates the transformative nature of Talen's engagement with the Reverend Billy character he created. He went from the grand embarrassment of his first Disney store incursion to forcefully chanting the First Amendment in Washington D. C. and on the streets of New York City. From watching videos as he prepares for performance, there is clearly some tension, which goes beyond simple concern that the performance will unfold smoothly. Wrapped up in his tension is the embarrassment over how he will be perceived in public space. Over time, however, Talen appears to have reasoned that embarrassment is inherent in, and important to, his calling, as it indicates the violation of social norms, necessary to bring about social change.

As Talen accepted Reverend Billy's growing spiritual and social responsibilities, he adapted his performances and theatrical techniques to embrace the church and congregation that was growing out of those

developing commitments. Through his oversight and direction, the Church of Stop Shopping's mission changed as well, becoming a church that performs, rather than a protest performance. As the Church's purpose solidified, the Reverend changed how he referred to it when engaged in a public performance. When challenged by security or police, Reverend Billy would now respond that he is on church business. Once when he performed in front of a Safeway, he was confronted by a security guard who wanted to interrupt his performance, she asked, "Can I talk to you for a moment?" Reverend Billy replied, "No. We're in church here. ... We are worshipping here" (dedots). Then he began his sermon without addressing her further.

During this period, he became increasingly spiritual, recognizing that "[s]piritual power comes every which way..." (Talen 2006 76), Talen's spiritual power began to take the form of a social movement religion. Traditional religion in the United States addresses individual salvation. When Reverend Billy applies himself to salvation it is a salvation for the masses; one is not saved alone. Talen's faith, and through it the faith of his Church, was born through acting and action: "Act as if you have faith and faith will be given you" (Dee). Reverend Billy might have been "born in parody, but [his service] was becoming less and less distinguishable from an actual church service -- a reaffirmation, in a ritualistic setting, of a common core of spiritual values," according to Dee. Reynolds's critique

was similar: “[T]he Reverend character as a whole, born (it would seem) in parody, is becoming more and more a serious civic leader” (42).

Reverend Billy’s Church fused the spiritual with the secular in a way that acknowledges the performative qualities of social life. Both Talen and the Church developed ways to offer spiritual support to secular needs, through Talen’s continual reassessment of his identity, goals, and communal needs.

The Church, with Reverend Billy, as its pastor, achieved a number of important successes during this time: “The harassment of Starbucks may have been a factor, at least, in a decision at corporate headquarters in Seattle to reverse policy on refusing to grant Ethiopia the right to trademark its most valuable coffee crops, notably the Sidama beans” (Usborne). Victoria’s Secret also capitulated to the Church’s criticism: “Victoria’s Secret, another frequent victim of Talen’s actions, bowed to pressure to begin using recycled paper in at least a portion of the no fewer than one million catalogues the lingerie company prints every day” (Usborne).

Talen recognized how his relationship to religion had evolved over his career. The length of time that Talen spent developing Reverend Billy’s character, adapting, and then adopting it, allowed him to see the spiritual changes he had made as he reflected on his career: “I really enjoy the sneaky things that have happened as a result of the longevity

of the project, the fact that I have so many people who come up to me and call me, 'Reverend,' or say 'Hi Rev,' as they walk by me on the subway and I have a role there" (Post, Palacios, and Talen). Talen did not realize that Reverend Billy would become so publicly known that he would frequently be recognized on the street as the Reverend, or that in those public greetings, he would eventually recognize the importance of the role that developed from it—that the theatrical role would become a social one.

When the role of "Reverend" escaped the bounds of theatre and became Talen's public role as well, Talen reflected on his many years struggle, before accepting of his pastoral role. That public role is the one he now lives daily, and which prompts the community to address him as "Reverend." The public role was an unexpected offshoot of performing the televangelist role in public, and corporate, space. However, despite its unexpected nature, the application of that role to broad social needs created a natural response in the community, whose members also served as audience. The audience saw the Reverend as reverend, perhaps before Talen did. The longevity of this project took a young man uncomfortable with the concept of religion, taught him how to adopt the poise and mannerisms of a televangelist, how to use the position of "Reverend" in our society to redirect social argument, and finally converted him into a man with a flock looking to him for guidance. The

acceptance of Talen, as Reverend Billy, a spiritual leader, by his followers now seems an almost expected outcome. For Talen though, the outcome was not expected; he took a long time to edge himself from a critical study of televangelist performance, to embracing the role as one to which he was called. Quite a few years of self-reflection were necessary, but as each reluctance fell to personal critique, Talen finally realized that he had slowly convinced himself to become “reverend” to his flock: “I was basically talking myself into it ever since I started sidewalk preaching in 97” (Post, Palacios, and Talen).

## CHAPTER V

### A RELIGIOUS AWAKENING

Almost as if that pastor's collar and the crafted character, "Reverend Billy," participated in a synergistic complicity, shifting what many years before had been an experimental lark, into a defiant reality, the collar became real and the actor, Bill Talen, coalesced with the character, "Reverend Billy," to become the activist minister, Reverend Billy Talen. The Reverend who was heralded in 2009 as a deeply committed activist using performance methods to highlight social concerns. He was no longer a performance artist portraying a preacher, using monologue as praxis to engage society's inconsistencies. He was now a guerrilla cleric, with a keen sense of the comic. Always, his wife Savitri D, the Choir, and a growing congregation aided and supported him. As the new year, 2009, unfolded, Reverend Billy expanded his artistic skills, seeking new ways to express his spiritual, artistic, and social vision. Even as he remained a showman and the year opened with new possibilities, his congregation relied upon him for moral guidance.

Many clerics have historically become activists when they pledged their allegiance to the powerless, so this approach was not new to Reverend Billy Talen as he had fought not only against the "placelessness" of Starbucks and Disney, but also for the underpaid coffee workers and Disney's factory workers. By now, however, his

constant fight for the powerless placed him in opposition to the powerful interests that seemed heedless of the social issues their practices created, an opposition that had also marked earlier forms of clerical activism. First among the issues, at the forefront of his activism was New York City, which remained a special love. As always, he cherished New York City for the shop owners who grounded its neighborhoods and for the sense of community that thrived just outside of gentrification's reach. This focus on reclaiming community in New York drove him to offer himself to the City as a mayoral candidate.

On March 1, 2009, Reverend Billy Talen began his run for Mayor of New York City, representing the Green Party (Mattera). He did so against a broad backdrop of failed and failing economic adventures, which many of the U. S. banks and securities firms had promoted. The financial markets were collapsing and taking the real estate market with it, but for Reverend Billy's congregation, and others like them, this meant a city that was more affordable and provided a more congenial social atmosphere. In an article for *The New York Times*, "Why Are These Renters Smiling?" Elizabeth A. Harris reported that rent for studio apartments in doorman buildings had fallen 8.33% since 2008. Harris interviewed realtor Georgia Kaporis, who explained that people were upgrading their apartments while paying less for rent. Renters had typically paid a broker fee (up to 15% of the year's rent), but in 2009 the



owners began to eliminate the middleman, negotiating their own rents. Harris reported, “Even New Yorkers who feel secure in their jobs are moving to save money.”

Some New Yorkers looked to the historical past, where they formed stories of people who had taken advantage of opportunities that resembled those in the shrinking economy of 2009. On February 16, 2009, Ann Banks, editor of *First-Person America*, an anthology of oral histories and a New York resident, wrote, “I believe storytelling is due for a revival. While the Federal Writers' Project is no longer around, it has inspired a modern version in StoryCorps, a five-year-old oral-history organization that encourages people to ‘celebrate one another's lives through listening. ’ ... Listening to each other's stories may grant us a sense of common purpose that money can't buy.” This oral history organization thus had much in keeping with Bill Talen’s belief in storytelling, from monologue to neighborhood conversation, as a salve for contemporary struggles.

In this contracting retail market, Talen championed other activities which had much in common with Reverend Billy’s aesthetic—neighborhood economies. Mike Albo, in a February, 2009, story in *The New York Times*, “Come Shop in their Backyard,” compares earlier activities in America to barter in the contemporary economy:

If you grew up in America, ... chances are you played "store" with your friends. You set up shop in the backyard and sold things for a common, agreed-upon currency: "Hello ma'am, as you can see, I have fresh sassafras leaves and fine red dirt! That will be five acorn tops! Thank you very much and have a nice day!" The work was hard and satisfying, everyone was affable, and items seemed to be worth their price.

Albo found vendors in the Dumbo neighborhood, in a market called "Brooklyn Flea," whose attributes were reminiscent of those childhood shopping adventures. On his visit to the market, Albo shopped among vendors of vintage, antique, and handcrafted goods and enjoyed "having warm, goofy exchanges with storekeepers just as I did when I was a major retail mogul in my backyard." This experience, like that described by Banks, underscores the value of neighborly communication and humor, which had long been key elements of Reverend Billy's work. Further, such experiences stands in contrast to the gentrification blight against which he had long preached. Albo concluded:

Unlike the glossy stores that surround it, Brooklyn Flea helps you feel more at ease about our dicey economy. There is a sense of community here that doesn't exist in

the meatpacking district or Williamsburg or Bleecker Street or any store with snobby employees sitting drolly behind their desks and their bangs and hating you when you walk in. If the econo-bust gets worse, I hope this is what thrives: local artisans, cheaper prices, people talking, pickles.

Albo's article also included a nod to those who had suffered from the earlier gentrification. The Brooklyn Flea now added interest to the neighborhood that had been lost with upscale development. Further, he noted, "The artists and scrappier merchants who were driven out of their lofts now come back here to sell their wares" (Albo).

Meanwhile New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg was seeing the crisis from an entirely different perspective. New York Times reporter, Jonathan Mahler, recalled a previous meeting, prior to the housing collapse, with the City's deputy mayor for economic development, Dan Doctorow. When the real estate market was booming, Mahler said Doctorow was "presiding over a long list of extensive public-private projects across the five boroughs, bold strokes of urban re-engineering reminiscent of the days of Robert Moses." In his time, Moses had built highways over neighborhoods, where he had decimated large swaths of New York neighborhoods in order to create thoroughfares and buildings suited to his vision of New York.

Under Bloomberg:

[T]he building boom, while breathing new life into a number of long-struggling neighborhoods, was problematic in its own right. New York got some first-class architecture, but it also got more than its share of eyesores, and the proliferation of luxury-condo towers accelerated the regrettable transformation of Manhattan into an island of the wealthy. Too much of the new construction did nothing to enrich the fabric of the city. (Mahler)

Yet Bloomberg was not deterred: “[T]he Bloomberg administration has no intention of scaling back its Moses-like ambitions.” They saw the latest collapse of private sector funds and the real estate market as but one of many downturns that New York had historically experienced and expected the market to recover and their development plans to continue. According to Mahler, one of the city’s best-known real estate appraisers, Jonathan Miller, said, during the period of collapsed economy, “The perception under Bloomberg has been that New York is a good place to do business, and that's very important for developers.”

Mayor Bloomberg’s goals, attitudes, and plans were thus in direct opposition to the vision Reverend Billy Talen had for New York City because Talen sided with the renters, shopkeepers, storytellers, and local shopping visionaries, instead of the developers. Because of this, he

declared himself the Green Party's mayoral candidate, standing in Union Square surrounded by supporters, the choir, and members of the Green Party. Wearing his electric blue jacket, black shirt, and clerical collar, he claimed New York for the people of New York, "New York is not a separate thing that is going to push us around. New York is all those people," referring to "the Alan Ginsbergs, the Charlie Parkers, the John Coltranes...the great New Yorkers." (seecraig). These people, he explained, and others like them, came to New York and found it a comfortable place to live. Further, "They were supported by their neighbors. Their genius was aided and abetted by the man at the deli" (seecraig). When he declared, "Neighborhoods are hip," and the audience responded with laughter and approval, he added, "I just came up with that. It's the holy jiggle coming into me" (seecraig). When he declared, "Neighborhoods are the future," he continued, condemning the bubble economies which he said were predators, washing over the neighborhoods like a "tsunami of monoculture" (seecraig). "My grandfather came here in 1896," he said. "Now there are neighborhoods "within echo distance of this bullhorn, where you cannot live on less than \$200,000 a year. ... Gentrification is the absence of God," he continued (seecraig). A member of the crowd raised his hands to the sky in approval of the message, and many "Amens" concluded Talen's declaration for mayor.

Talen positioned his campaign against Bloomberg by aligning himself with small neighborhood concerns and associating Bloomberg with the collapsing real estate and financial markets. The *Green Pages*, the online newspaper for the Green Party, quoted Talen: “The bubble economies that Mike Bloomberg leads, like Wall Street and real estate speculation, should no longer be allowed to invade the neighborhoods. If elected Mayor, I would put resources into supporting small community banks and credit unions. They care about making loans to people and businesses work” (gp.org). With the failure of those “bubble economies,” the Reverend saw new opportunities, and described them to one reporter, Deborah Barrow, “Wall Street crashed, Obama rises, theres (sic) lots of change in the air, peoples (sic) hearts are open” (Barrow).

Talen also charged Bloomberg with thinking New York as a corporation, with Bloomberg as the CEO of that corporation. Claiming that Bloomberg hoped to “spin off the subsidiaries that are losing money” (seecraig), Talen warned of what this meant: “His idea of the subsidiary that is not making money for him is the neighborhood,” Talen charged (seecraig). That threat to neighborhoods was made even more obvious by the fact that “[Bloomberg gave] sixty million dollars in tax benefits to chain stores last year” (seecraig). Shaping his own campaign very effectively for the neighborhoods, Talen declared: “This campaign will be the revolt of the fabulous 500 neighborhoods. Amen” (seecraig).

In an interview with a reporter for *The New York Times*, before a gathering of his supporters, Talen predicted that Mike Bloomberg would not win because he was running against “democracy,” reminding the interviewer that New Yorkers had voted for term limits and Bloomberg’s campaign in essence broke the law. When asked whether he himself represented “democracy,” Talen replied that there were many worthy candidates and that the power to defeat Bloomberg was in the democratic responses of neighborhoods. Citing the Coney Island and Atlantic Yards campaigns, in which he participated, as examples of the ways in which neighborhoods could curtail Bloomberg’s aspirations, he said, “We fought him to a standstill in Coney Island and Atlantic Yards. ... He’s trying to privatize Times Square. There are some neighborhoods where we lost, but New Yorkers are learning” (seecraig “NYC Green”). He went on: “As I tried to convey in my little sermonette there. A good economy has people sustaining each other. A good economy has an element of the gift economy in it. And that’s what a healthy neighborhood has. ... If I can encourage that in the next nine months, then we will have had a successful campaign” (seecraig “NYC Green”). Then he added, laughing with his supporters, “But we will win, right?” (seecraig “NYC Green”).

Talen went on to describe how he would prosecute his campaign: “We are gonna do some of the things that Reverend Billy has done. We’re

going to have a rally, inside of a traffic jam. We are going to make a point about the domination of our environment by cars and trucks and how pedestrian and bicycle safety is a real issue here” (seecraig “NYC Green”). His campaign would thus take his group throughout the city, reclaiming it. They would be on rooftops and inside of buildings, where they were invited and where they were not. Wrapping up the interview, he describes the campaign as a “. . . long love shout” (seecraig “NYC Green”).

In one of his early campaign videos, Talen’s campaign office can be seen to look much like others across the country as candidates find small storefronts and prepare for a hectic campaign (reverendbillytalen 8/24/2009). Outside his office a banner read, “Vote Rev Billy Talen.” One of his first video messages, dated March 29, 2009, begins with the opening lines, “New York City is ready for a New Day in Politics” and “It’s up to You, New York. We are the ‘You’ in New York” (reverendbillytalen “It’s Up to You”). Reverend Billy’s struggle was to show New Yorkers that his campaign offered an opportunity to reclaim New York as a land uniquely marked by its citizens’ creative business, communal, and culinary traditions.

The difficulty his campaign faced was two-fold. First, the Reverend was already engaged in a life-long career dedicated to unmasking the colonization of New York by transnational corporations. In order to



become mayor, he would also have to succeed at this pre-existing monumental endeavor. Success in that career effort, would then, one assumes, leverage his campaign as a champion of the people and win him the mayoralty. Cynics might have imagined that Talen was using his campaign simply to further his own career goals. However, watching his campaign, observing his earnest effort might have dissuaded all but the most cynical. His approach was genuine; if the people of New York could come to see concerns and his hopes, surely they would elect him mayor.

The second difficulty arose when The Wall Street Journal's video of Reverend Billy Talen on April 16, 2009, described him as a "self-ordained minister" (wsj.com). Referring to him by this title was fitting at this point in his career. However, when he was challenged in a CNN interview to explain the institutional basis of his right to the word "reverend," his response showed a hint of embarrassment, and confusion. He had not thought out a succinct, socially acceptable answer; perhaps he had been too close to the subject, knew he had invented the character as a performance artist. At this point he had no clear framework to explain to a diverse viewing audience that he had, through that journey, become a minister of a very special kind. The Wall Street Journal reporter, however, needed no such clarification. For him, there are self-ordained ministers and Reverend Billy Talen was, and is, one of them.

The reporter, David Weidner made clear that Reverend Billy preaches against the evils of consumerism, which “is a lie,” according to Talen. And as not only “[t]he commercialization of people, places, and communities, but ... the economic and financial crisis has unfolded, Reverend Billy has been sharpening his criticism,” wrote Weidner. That criticism encompassed even the Obama administration’s stimulation package in the Fall of 2009. Even the “aesthetic” of that stimulus package, Talen charged, was based in consumerism. In addition, he told Weidner that there has not been enough talk about sustainable economies, and Weidner concludes that economic upheaval has brought new converts to the Reverend’s cause. One member of the Choir, all of whom were dressed in “Green Party” green robes, bears this out when Weidner interviews her. Adetolah Abiade tell her that she had previously worked with Merrill Lynch and in that position had provided financial advice to entrepreneurs, a experience that raised her appreciation of the small business segment of the economy.

Weidner ultimately agrees with Talen that “Reverend Billy is turning his fight for neighborhood-based economies into a run for mayor of New York City” and conveys more of Talen’s reasoning quoting him in more detail: “The attitude from the center here in Manhattan is that the five boroughs in New York and Jersey are the soft colonies ... . They are innocent Norman Rockwell small towns that need gentrification and

chain stores and every other sort of luxury condo” (wsj.com). Talen continues, “Neighborhoods have economies. Some of the most successful local economies were neighborhoods that were not involved and not vulnerable to Wall Street, to tourism, [or] to these [other] economies that Mike Bloomberg represents” (wsj.com). Talen’s approach to economic development would differ radically from Bloomberg’s proposals, he explained, “I would give microloans. I would build up economies on the ground. That takes more work. Then you have to know... You have to go up and down the street and you have to know the little businesses” (wsj.com).

One campaign video that endorsed Talen’s campaign showed him walking a neighborhood, carrying a podium rather than a pulpit. The podium featured a collection of faux microphones, perhaps representing the media which were not covering his campaign nor taking him seriously. Stopping at small businesses, the owners were filmed endorsing his candidacy. “The points of his platform would make a much better New York,” said a bookstore owner. “I’ve been here for 30 years. I love to serve my neighborhood my food or my tradition of Italy,” said a restaurateur. Another said, “The Rite Aides, the CVSs, and the Chase Banks and the Dunkin’ Donuts and the eyesores ... are homogenizing all of our neighborhoods” (reverendbillytalen “Singing Endorsement”). The film concludes with the shop owners endorsing “Rev

Billy Talen for Mayor” and the song, “New York, New York,” sung to new lyrics: “Start sharing the wealth, I’m hoping to stay, I came to live my life here, New York, New York” (reverendbillytalen “Singing Endorsement”). The shop owners and businesses represent a cross-section of a local, vibrant New York, with showing that traditional New Yorkers are willing to commit to a wild-eyed preacher with bleached hair and a bold message.

Reverend Billy had to find ways to balance the competing demands of commitment to his anti-consumerist ministerial campaign and his campaign for Mayor of New York City. In late May, Reverend Billy and the Choir decided to attend to their socio-economic obligation, taking their anti-consumerist message to England. The *Express and Echo*, in Exeter, reported on Reverend Billy’s appearance at Tesco, a chain store which he exorcised prior to his performance in the Phoenix Theatre. His message to the consumers in Exeter was to shop at local, independent businesses, and blessed independent shops during the outdoor portion of his tour. At the Phoenix Theatre the performance was sold out, with Reverend Billy and the green-robed choir performing to a crowd of 200. The Reverend explained their motivation: “We are singing and preaching for local economies and real, not mediated through product, experiences” (Fletcher). Even though the Exeter stop was one of 11 venues at which he appeared in the UK, Reverend Billy pledged support to local activists,

“who are defending themselves against super-malls, nuke plants, and gentrification,” offering “fabulous worship,” should they need him (Fletcher). Reverend Billy described his mission in Exeter, Reverend Billy declared, “We are here to sing, preach, charm, berate, seduce and rescue everyone” (Fletcher). More precisely he stated that the Church was concerned with “global advertising, multi-national control, global warming, packaging, supermarket domination, TV merchandising, and the rest of rampant free marketeering” (Fletcher).

Rosie Clarke wrote a positive, if much more visceral review of the Reverend’s performance in Brighton, describing the opening of a credit card exorcism:

"Something is not right!" growled the preacher, lizard-like tongue flicking, fervid eyes popping, sweat dripping down his face from his rigid pompadour. "Someone in this audience has brought. . . a credit card!" Behind Reverend Billy a choir in turquoise and gold robes seethed and groaned and called for "Change-e-lujah."

However, at first, the Brighton audience did not warm to this performance until the evil was exorcised from one credit card “while the choir whopped and hollered and called down blessings” (Clarke). At that point the crowd “relaxed and clapped along” (Clarke). As Clarke described it, as the sermon rose to a crusading crescendo, “all speeches

sound better when backed by an exuberant choir validating every exhortation with ‘Praise Be’ or ‘Lord have mercy!’”

The Brighton performance also included a localized rendition of the Church’s “Back Away from the Product” song, performed as “Back Away from the Tesco” (Clarke). The song, “Do I have a Lover or a Logo,” was “powerfully delivered,” according to Clarke. However, the lyrics were difficult to follow in the other Brighton space, and Clarke suggesting that “[t]his choir’s natural environment is surely a town centre or shopping mall.”

Upon Reverend Billy’s return to New York, he threw himself into his mayoral campaign with a vigorous routine of performance, debate, public challenge, and advertising, beginning in late July with a benefit concert fundraiser at the Highline Ballroom. When Joan Baez appeared, she explained that she thought she had signed on to a “Stop Shopping” event, only to discover that she was to appear at a political event. But she incorporated her praise for Reverend Billy’s commitment to exposing the abusive working conditions under which clothing and textile goods are produced for consumption in the United States into the event: “He’s taken on a monumental task and he’s taken it on with such heart ... that it’s a glory to behold...” (Hill).

Baez sang a rendition of “We Shall Overcome,” which was later incorporated into a campaign video (reverendbillytalen “Joan Baez”), and

though Reverend Billy catches the eye in his white suit, he kept a respectful distance and let Baez take center stage. “Save for what is needed,” Baez sang, with the Choir and Talen singing backup, and she gave beautiful voice to another of Talen’s favorite themes, “We do not need Disneyland” (reverendbillytalen “Joan Baez”). Like the campaign film showcasing local merchants, Joan Baez’s appearance in the film provided an opportunity for Reverend Billy’s message to reach a broader audience.

In another campaign video, Reverend Billy performed and filmed a Disney Store intervention. The video opens and closes with a focus on a bumper sticker for Billy Talen for Mayor New York which also reads “Vote Reverend Billy.” The sticker, in red, white, and blue, with five stars (likely representing the five boroughs), directs the viewer to vote for Reverend Billy. One large, “V” shared by Vote and the Rev, is shaped to look like a ballot checkmark in a very professional presentation. This video reveals Reverend Billy’s mayoral candidacy dilemma: he certainly could not have turned his attention exclusively to his campaign and given up, at least for a while, pointing at Disney and remain true to his calling, so he filmed this intervention as a campaign promotional. In familiar fashion, Reverend Billy brought the two together and exerts the customers of the store to “[h]ave the moral courage to leave this place. Do the research. Find out about these products. Find out where these

products came from. Disney is not a good company to put your money into” (revbilly 8/7/2009). Though strongly committed to his mayoral campaign, he did not marginalize his aesthetic approach, nor his positions on big box and transnational stores during this period.

Talen continued his effort to frame his run for mayor in ways similar to other campaigns for political office. His many campaign videos attest to his effort to represent his campaign as a viable contender for office, and to share his bold vision with New Yorkers. The opening of one of his campaign videos begins with a message that reads, “REAL Democracy, Signed and Delivered,” and told of the “[o]ver 100 Volunteers gathered 18,000 signatures from New Yorkers like you who believe in Democracy” (reverendbillytalen August 24, 2009). This video, which takes advantage of his skills as a performer, was clearly focused on his campaign, and does not appear to be the work of an artist hoping to further his career. It contains footage showing his dedicated campaign workers, in his campaign headquarters, contacting potential voters and focusing on the issues of the day. Talen accused both the Democrats and the Republicans of representing only rightist positions. He said that both Democrats and Republicans have “slipped over to a conservative place” (reverendbillytalen August 24, 2009).

In this campaign video, released through *YouTube.com*, Talen stresses that Mayor Bloomberg has used his power simply to remain in



power, revealing a deep contempt for democracy. Talen reports that Bloomberg had persuaded twenty-nine members of the City Council to overturn the New Yorkers' vote for term limits, an act Talen repeatedly called illegal. He also accused Bloomberg of hypocrisy, describing Bloomberg's appearances in "TV ads all day long, being 'folksy' in neighborhoods that he's been destroying" (reverendbillytalen August 24, 2009).

In early September, Reverend Billy and the Choir made a campaign tour on the New York Subway No. 2 Train, the video for which was produced by WNBC, warning the commuters he encountered that they did not have to be hypnotized by all the television ads directed at them, emphasizing instead the importance of being "Citizens, not consumers" (reverendbillytalen September 2, 2009). The voiceover in this ad tells the viewer that "he may look funny, but he's absolutely serious about running for mayor." Because he is claiming the No. 2 train as a performance and public space, many voters were frightened, confused, excited; one even slept through it all, but some started listening , according to coverage on WNBC. One woman mentioned that what the Reverend was saying "made a lot of sense. ... I think he's great. ... We don't need millions of dollars to run for mayor. It's about integrity" (reverendbillytalen September 2, 2009). The last woman interviewed on the segment said it would "be a stretch" for her to consider voting for him

even though Reverend Billy was convinced that people did not want politics as usual (reverendbillytalen September 2, 2009). Though much of his reception was positive, WNBC's coverage closed on a negative note.

One of the most difficult videos for a sympathetic viewer, such as myself, to watch during the campaign was WNBC's "Video Voter Guide." In this video, the Reverend appears to be very aware that he will be watched by a broad spectrum of voters, some of whom will not have heard of him, and whose votes he clearly needs to win the race. In the video, he appears to be caught between two worlds, clearly not wanting his performance to get in the way of his message, but also stuck with his preacher's uniform and his dyed-blond pompadour. Other candidates, even from lesser known parties, were not faced with this type of difficult situation. The Reverend, "born of parody," was required to appeal for common sense from within the trappings of hyperbole, which he had constructed over his lifetime as a performance artist. The graphics behind him were boring and repetitive. It was an extraordinarily difficult role to play, on a poorly designed set, and before an unprepared audience. I believe he did as well as possible in meeting this challenge.

He began this appearance by introducing himself as "Reverend Billy Talen running for Mayor on the Green Party ticket" (reverendbillytalen September 12, 2009). Listing many of his key concerns: "Wall Street financed invasion of our neighborhoods. ....

Skyrocketing rent, chain stores and big boxes, eminent domain and evictions and erosion of our rent controls.” Dressed in his electric blue jacket, his black shirt, and clerical collar, he explains that the neighborhood’s economies were being consumed by Wall Street-financed incursions, though the collapse of Wall Street momentarily brought the bulldozers to a halt (reverendbillytalen September 12, 2009). This, he argued, presented an opportunity for neighborhoods to regain control of their communities. In this Guide, he does not emphasize his “televangelist” persona, but he speaks much more quietly. He dresses the part of televangelist but appeals quite calmly and passionately for his cause, returning a second time to an earlier theme of healthy neighborhoods, which have elements of a gift economy, arguing that the city should give microloans to hardware shops, diners, flower shops, and the like. Charging that the City’s role should be to protect economic and financial rights of local business people, he calls the rise of 500 fabulous neighborhoods to rise and help him, and caps his call with a hearty “Amen” (revbillytalen September 12, 2009).

When a mayoral debate was scheduled for October 13, 2009, all third party candidates were excluded from the debate, including Talen. He and other candidates met before the debate to protest this decision. *The New York Times* reported that outside of the locus of debate, just minutes before it was to begin, supporters of Democratic Mr. Thompson

“waved campaign posters and chanted: ‘Eight is enough!’ and ‘Take a hike, Mike!’” (Chan and Barbard). Behind them, Billy Talen, the Green Party candidate for mayor, threw shoes at a life-size poster-board cutout of Mayor Bloomberg standing behind a lectern (Chan and Barbard). *The New York Times* also reported that there were plumbers and ironworkers present, holding signs that read, “Labor for Mike” (Chan and Barbard).

Reverend Billy later described his feelings on waiting in line to enter the debate not as a candidate should have been able to but simply as an audience member:

I felt gathering in the glowing light of the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue museum the official power that was invited: hundreds of real estate speculators and Wall Street bankers, city agency heads and big donors, all of them dressed to the teeth. This first debate was a benchmark for this political/financial class of New Yorkers. ... The power people embraced each other with a frightening, erotic intensity. They would be rich again. (Talen “Divine Heckle.”)

During the opening remarks, Reverend Billy interrupted Bloomberg, “shout[ing] epithets attacking the mayor’s support of legislation last year extending term limits to allow himself to seek another term” (Chan and Barbard). In the video of this interruption,

Reverend Billy can be heard shouting, “Mike, what are you doing here? We Voted for Term Limits!” (reverendbillytalen “We Voted for Term Limits!”). Talen, wearing his electric blue suit jacket, preacher’s shirt and collar, was then removed from the room.

As Talen remembers this event, it is much more intense:  
My heart is racing. ... Can I rise to the biggest sermon of my life? Can I be loud enough to get into their live feed on the stage microphones? My heart is absolutely jerking.  
NOW. I stand up. I inhale deeply, a whole body oxygenation, pulling in air-power through my feet my back my chest my scalp.... Now vibrate absolutely every part of your body Billy. Like a human woofer. Let it out. Boom it. Now! MIKE WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? ...  
Everyone on stage has stopped talking, paralyzed with the preacher blast. A second big gulp of air. Alright. Let it fly. WE VOTED FOR TERM LIMITS! [T]he hands across my mouth, half-nelson under the arm, pulled toward the side aisle, toward the EXIT. ... I was high from it all.  
Everything was beautiful. I did what I do. I preached. ...  
I always wanted my campaign to be my life. (Talen “Divine Heckle”)

Talen's campaign was his life, including aspects of his performance from the time he was a barker in New Orleans, right up to this moment, which included his deft use of language, his booming voice, Reverend Billy's bold persona, and Talen's full commitment to social issues. This moment in Talen's campaign embrace it all, enshrining all the grand embarrassments he had learned on numerous theaters throughout his career, whether they were theatrical, retail, or public stages. The campaign was his life—this moment was his life—and he let all of the years of tense stage entrances burst through on this political stage. With his voice booming, Talen delivers his message to a resistant audience, saying what he knew New Yorkers needed to hear, and accepting the brunt of rejection from New York's powerful elite class. In every regard, this campaign was his life, fully lived and powerfully presented.

The term limit argument also was made by Thompson in his opening statement when, according to *The New York Times*, Thompson “accused the mayor of changing the law to ‘undermine’ term limits that the voters had approved at the polls” (Chan and Barbard). Later in the debate, Thompson called “Mr. Bloomberg’s actions ... a betrayal of Democracy” (Chan and Barbard). Thompson also challenged Bloomberg’s stance on re-zoning in New York City saying there were “luxury buildings sitting vacant” and that “middle-class and working-class New Yorkers were being squeezed ... out of their neighborhoods”

(Chan and Barbard). These sentiments echoed similar critiques Talen had made throughout his campaign, but which he was not allowed to give voice to during the debate.

Reverend Billy's campaign produced three additional videos attacking Mayor Bloomberg. One titled "What do you see? – King Mike," features a Bloomberg ad but appends to it images of wealth, the buying of power, and the destruction of neighborhoods (reverendbillytalen "What Do You See?" -- King Mike.). Another video shows Reverend Billy interrupting a speech by Bloomberg. In this video, Reverend Billy's image is superimposed over the actual footage of the speeches, resulting in mock interaction between the two men. Reverend Billy challenges Bloomberg: "We are not consumers. We are citizens. It is not a corporation. It is New York City." The ad is expertly executed, and the entire Bloomberg team fades away, as a white light behind the Reverend illuminates him with an artful glow (reverendbillytalen October 15, 2009). The final campaign video, released on November 3, 2009, shows Reverend Billy Talen in his white suit and with his ubiquitous bullhorn. He is being attacked by zombies, who wear Bloomberg masks--Zombergs. Though he calls out that he does not know where they are all coming from, he warns that they want four more years, or eight, or sixteen. Most of the zombies are dressed in suits, although some other costumes can

be seen, and quite a few participants have bloodied hands and clothing (reverendbillytalen “Zombergs!”).

On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009, Michael Bloomberg was elected to a third term as mayor of New York City. Sara Kugler, of the Associated Press, reported that “Billionaire Michael Bloomberg won a third term as New York mayor Tuesday in a closer-than-expected race against a Democratic challenger who stoked voter resentment over the way Bloomberg changed term-limits law so he could stay in office.” (Winning with a margin of only five points over his challenger Democrat William Thompson, Bloomberg won in Staten Island, the non-Hispanic districts of Manhattan, and the Upper East Side. “Thompson ran up huge margins in black and Hispanic neighborhoods, winning by a 3-to-1 margin in some districts,” said Kugler, who estimated that Bloomberg, “probably spent more than \$100 million on his campaign. [While,] Thompson ... relied on donations and matching funds for his mayoral bid ... [and] spent a tenth of Bloomberg’s staggering total” (Kugler). Bloomberg’s money was critical to his success; not only did he spend \$50 million advertising, he spent millions more on strategists and staffers (Kugler), as well as database management techniques that allowed for specialized targeting of voter messaging (Kugler). When Bloomberg strategists realized that voters were not turning out in sufficient numbers in the Bronx and Queens, operatives immediately changed strategies and called on “former mayor



Ed Koch to record a last-minute robocall that began calling Bronx voters around 5 p. m.” (Kugler). Field workers were also redirected to Queens to buoy the sagging voter response in that key area.

According to Kugler, “Many Thompson supporters said Tuesday that term limits was the single reason why they voted for him.” Even though Reverend Billy Talen was not elected mayor because it would have been a “stretch” for some people to vote for him, it may well be that the “divine heckle” played a part in voter decisions on election night. Because of the diversity of Talen’s video presentations, Talen may have built a better overall message than Thompson did, with the Associated Press report suggesting that anger over Bloomberg’s term-limit extension was insufficient to define Thompson’s vision for New York. Talen, with his support from local business owners, may well have been on target in capturing the mood of the people, but he lacked the financial power to bring it to fruition. Furthermore, his eccentric style may have challenged some voters who are accustomed to more conservative representation.

The campaign videos mentioned above primarily focused on staging, while the text of his campaign effectively managed his political message. In the videos, the choice of green robes for the choir, representing the Green Party, worked to anchor his campaign to his political party, while their singing is reminiscent of church choirs everywhere. The lyrics, however, diverge greatly from those songs by

traditional church choirs. The delivery is soulful, but the message is transgressive and challenges the audience to act against social expectations.

Altogether, the videos create an impressive collage of imagery—each piece unique and bold—which do not seem to contain a single artistic thread. Nevertheless the collection creates an unusual montage of thought, spirit, and purpose. The Reverend’s political ideas are showcased by these different approaches, and because the topics have common foundations, centering on neighborhood awareness and community values, the videos work well together, in promoting a social ideal, despite their variation in tone.

If Talen had hoped to achieve political office, he might have forsaken the plethora of possibilities represented by his videos and chosen a series of ads which built upon each other to seamlessly reach out to non-believers. His repertoire of comic devices would have been very useful to him in interrupting the “everyday,” thereby creating an opportunity for discussion centered on his vision for New York City. His ability to work as both a brash televangelist and an earnest pastor creates a startling contrast at times and serves to accentuate the passion behind his social and cultural commitments. For instance, in the video of his confrontation with Starbucks at Astor Place, over the trademark rights of the people of Ethiopia, his staging was very poignant. He was

the Reverend Talen—a name he has not yet assumed. Allowing New Yorkers to see a bit more of this type of social and spiritual leadership may have pulled a few more votes for Bloomberg's tally.

After the election, Reverend Billy Talen mused, "I lost this campaign, but I'll have another chance to have the power to interrupt power. Won't I?" (Talen) That statement implies that his election afforded him an opportunity to interrupt power regardless of whether he won or lost the election. Still, the question of whether this election campaign was about extending Talen's artistic critique of power or an effort to gain office is not easily answered. He threw himself physically, energetically, and sincerely into his campaign regardless of the slim possibility of gaining the mayorship, perhaps, because any of the three, art, interruption, or success, were worth the fight. The third parties that challenged Mayor Bloomberg had small chance of winning, but Talen's divine heckle may well have cost Bloomberg a percentage point or two. Perhaps it was one of the reasons that Bloomberg's ground force had to change strategies at the last minute and bring in Koch's robocall. Talen's campaign likely added to the cost of Bloomberg acquiring his third term (Talen "Divine Heckle").

### **Between campaigns**

The mayoral race ended just in time for the 2009 holiday season to begin. By late November, the Reverend and the Choir were energized

against the coming onslaught of consumerism. As in other years, cable news channels found the Reverend's message to be a unique counterpoint to the wave of advertisements and sales news, creating one of the opposition voices to the familiar, "Black Friday," vision of the day after Thanksgiving as being the day on which retail stores' profits suddenly rise in response to the Christmas season. CNN caught Reverend Billy sermonizing on the importance of slowing down consumption. The text at the opening of CNN's video clip read, "STOP SHOPPING! Turning Black Friday into 'buy nothing day'" (reverendbillytalen 12/1/2009).

Reverend Billy Talen's message in 2009 was interlaced with the language of the environmentalist. He said that his Church urged "people to slow down their shopping," but he condemned the practice for a variety of reasons, such as the debt that consumers carry on their credit cards, the "sweat shops thousands of miles away," fossil fuel, and plastics (reverendbillytalen 12/1/2009). Talen took his argument even further and listed earth-centric reasons to curtail consumerism. Further developing an environmental argument, he pointed out that the "shopping hype" drives consumers to "the big box companies [and] chain stores" (reverendbillytalen 12/1/2009). He claimed that local shopping creates a sustainable economy that is friendlier to neighborhoods, to working families, and to the earth. Talen saw in the economy of late

2009 a split in the way American people were considering their purchasing options. While, he said that some were ready to find a new way of living, others were “ready to go into debt again” (reverendbillytalen 2009).

Jen Carlson, of the *Gothamist* reported that Reverend Billy began his “Buy Nothing Day” ritual service at Macy’s, saying, “We’ll be there at 5am, when shoppers who have been up all night wait in line to rush the glass doors. This is the human comedy at its most sad, and it is an environmental shopocalypse” (Carlson). Later he returned to the Valley Stream Wal-Mart, the scene of employee Jdymdai Damou’s trampling death the previous year. Reverend Billy and the Life After Shopping Gospel Choir also appeared in Greenfield, Massachusetts, on December 19, 2009, at the All Souls Church. They presented their performance as a prelude to the afternoon’s Christmas Vigil Mass, according to the *Republican*, the local newspaper (“Religion Notes”).

A hectic pre-Christmas schedule kept Reverend Billy on televisions as well as in the streets; he appeared on “Fox Business Happy Hour” on December 22, 2009. In this interview, Reverend Billy announced, “The shop-ocalypse is taking place now! We’re slowing down our shopping across this country” (Fox Business). When pressed for the “biggest” reason to reduce consumption, the Reverend replied, “I wasn’t going to say this tonight, but OK. The reason we have to stop shopping is that

our CEO is the earth. The earth is telling us we can't be consumers the way we have been over the recent years. We've got to change how we live, especially at Christmas when so much of this consumption takes place" (Fox Business). In the discussion that followed with the Fox interviewers, Sandra Smith and Rebecca Diamond, Reverend Billy then cited excess use of fossil fuels needed to travel to big stores, while sustainable local economies were better for the Earth. To Diamond's argument that, "at the end of the day, Reverend Billy, you got to go shopping. We do need some things" (Fox Business), Reverend Billy agreed but explained that he continually receives email from people throughout the United States saying that people are changing the way they shop. He explained that people are buying local or having a "no money" Christmas by making gifts, performing plays, or having home reality shows (Fox Business). Diamond pointed out, "[C]onsumer spending is two thirds of what drives this economy" (Fox Business). To this Reverend Billy replied, "[T]here's a green industry waiting for us," and, further charged, "[T]he 70 percent consumer economy is not working. ... It's falling apart on its own" (Fox Business).

On Reverend Billy Talen's interview the next day with CNN, he reiterated his earth-centric position, "The Earth is our CEO. Not the corporations. Not the government. ... If you sustain your local economy, that's much better for the earth, much better for life. The earth is talking

to us. The fires and the droughts and the extinctions and the melting ice, that means something.” (Holmes et al). He explained that the government, in asking its citizens to shop, was asking them to support big box stores. Velshi said, “You predicted for years that we would be in a financial crisis because of people’s spending habits and excessive debt. Do you really believe this is what has us here now?” (Holmes et al). Reverend Billy replied, “Well, absolutely” (Holmes et al).

Velshi probed the Reverend’s ministerial presentation, and the Reverend Billy confirmed his calling:

VELSHI: Reverend, now this is a character that you've been in for a while. You've been an entertainer. It's not really a religion.

REVEREND BILLY: Trust me, Ali, it's not a character anymore. I'm afraid -- I am Reverend Billy now. (Holmes et al)

As to the impact that the Gospel according to Reverend Billy, was making on society at large Velshi asked, “Has anything changed as to how people respond to you?,” and Reverend Billy responded, “Absolutely. We’re not as whacky as we used to be, are we?” (Holmes et al). The audience responded, “No.” To the now common question of what happens to the consumer economy of the United States if everybody were to stop shopping, Reverend Billy again explained, “There’s another economy.

There's a secret economy. It needs to be reported. It's a local economy. Local manufacturers... Start-ups... [People] know the corporations aren't helping them. ... People are just starting over. And that is going on all over this country right now" (Holmes et al).

In late December, Reverend Billy Talen released a video, "Lover Logo," which shows an alluring nightclub singer, portrayed by Gina Figueroa, with Reverend Billy seated in the club. She sings, with the Church's seven man band providing the instrumentals, "Are you my lover? Are you my logo?" Reverend Billy and the Church of Life After Shopping's website described the video:

Here we have chanteuse Gina Figueroa, obviously turning the Rev's worship spotlight toward her. The confusion of desire with consumer addiction is yet again our theme.

What a sad and basic request from a besotted consumer:

"Are you my Lover? Or are you my Logo?" But how terribly tragic when we are fooled into not asking the question at all and end up with a knock-off Omega watch and not Brad Pitt. (revbilly.com)

This video is the first entry in the field of a true music video. The lyrics were written by Bill Talen; music was composed by the Choir director, William Moses. This was included in the Church's *The Shopocalypse* album on which they began work in December, 2007. As



for the dance numbers in the album, these are “special late night subversion opportunities, slip them in that party mix” (revbilly.com).

Reverend Billy joined another anti-consumerist group, Retail Action Project, for their February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010, action. In his sermon that day he recalled the “memory” of prior protests: gender rights, women’s rights, civil rights and labor rights. In doing so, he aligned his cause with those foundational social movements. These memories are said to reside within the people engaged in anti-consumerism. He then recalled for the audience the failures of the mayoral race, wherein he stated that he was unable to inspire the powerless people of the city with the agenda, or to defend them. He said that having failed there, he, and the audience, would have to find other ways to act on their behalf. He continued, “We have to find other ways. I feel like right now this moment is the seed. Just what we are doing right now... You can get discouraged so easily, but this moment right now, this march right now, I feel we are about to usher in a new era of entering into public space in great numbers” (reverendbillytalen “Rev. Billy Preaching”). To this the audience whooped and hollered approval. They hoped, as Reverend Billy did, that a new social movement would be born soon out of the economic tension around them. In the grip of the Great Recession, Reverend Billy hoped and prayed, perhaps, that the people who had been cut loose from

their social moorings of job and pension might find their way to the streets and to his Church.

In support of gay marriage, Reverend Billy performed, and officiated, a well-attended unmarriage, on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010. In this protest action, approximately 80 couples attended the service and pledged fealty to their spouses outside of marriage until such time as all people were legally allowed to marry. The ceremony was held in Central Park and utilized many of the trappings of a traditional marriage, including a white flower bedecked arch under which Reverend Billy and Savitri stood and faced the audience. The couples lined up in front of the arch, affirmed their love for one another, and unmarried each other through this ceremony:

I, [repeat your name], do stand here with you, promising to love you and to care for you. I will honor and respect you outside the boundaries of marriage, and without the sanction of any but myself. I, [and your name again], hereby ... am unmarried until that day when all people are free. Free to marry the person of their choosing and receive equal protection under the law. Amen (Avi)

According to Avi, of the *Westside Independent*, couples pledged to “suspend their marriages until all Americans can marry.” Further, the ceremony came with un-marriage certificates which, the site reported,

Reverend Billy would send to New York City Hall. Molasses cookies were distributed to represent the slow pace of gay marriage legislation. The performance had a festive atmosphere, with some participants dressed as brides. Savitri was dressed in a tuxedo and stood next to the Reverend, reciting the vow along with the assembly.

Despite the power and importance of each of these early 2010 campaigns, none would be the focal campaign for the year. That campaign, the Mountaintop Removal protest, consumed most of Reverend Billy's and the Church's ambition and commitment throughout the remainder of the year.

### **Mountaintop removal**

A strange religious ritual took place in the lobby of a Chase Bank branch on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and 10<sup>th</sup> Street on March 21, 2010. The Choir and Reverend Billy approached the bank from 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue carrying platters above their heads, laden with "the murdered mud of Cal Mountain in West Virginia" (LiveFreeSpeech). The Choir wore their green robes, which might well have been the same ones they wore as members of the Green Party mayoral campaign. They sang, clapped, and swayed as they laid down a round blue tarp in the lobby. They sang their mountain anthem, "Bring back the mountain children, Chase is gonna bring back the mountain" (LiveFreeSpeech). After their anthem was sung, each communicant emptied a platter of mud

onto the tarp. The pile grew to a few feet tall and they shaped it to resemble a mountain. Then Reverend Billy handed his bullhorn to the choir and held his hand high to bless the Church's work and to witness their communal effort. The Choir then gave voice to the full anthem:

Have we been to the mountaintop?

Did we do what we could do?

JP Morgan rained down rock

Exploding loans of the Devil came due

Have we been to the mountain top?

The highest ground for our last stand?

The oldest peak is a vacant lot

There's cancer in the mud in the promised land

There's cancer in the mud in the promised land

America, America. . .

The graves in the valley keep your dream alive

America, America. . .

Your children will climb back to the sky

Have we been to the mountain top?

Inhale deep and see for miles?

We're so amazed we forget to shop

We're dreaming again on the mountaintop

We're dreaming again on the mountaintop

Coal in the mountain. . .

What could we do?

Rain down rock. . .

What could we do?

Cancer in the mud. . .

What could we do?

Poisoned streams. . .

What could we do?

Oldest peak. . .

What could we do?

Ripped up my woods. . .

What could we do?

America, America. . .

The graves in the valley keep your dream alive

America, America. . .

Your children will climb back to the sky

Your children will climb back to the sky

The lyrics were composed by Bill Talen and the music by Laura Newman and E. Katrina Lewis. Opening lines are intentionally reminiscent of Dr. Martin Luther King's last speech. Outside, Reverend Billy spoke to his audience, incorporating lines from Dr. King's speech into his own. . He told the audience, "That's dirt from a strip mining operation in West Virginia, children. It was financed by JPMorgan Chase, but we took it back here. And we're going to have mountains appearing all over this city and all over this nation. This is the beginning of a movement and we are inviting people to make your own mountain in a lobby of Chase and do as we are doing here. When you make that mountain *YouTube* it, videotape it, send it to revbilly.com. ... And leave a message for the CEO Jamie Dimon" (LiveFreeSpeech). Talen then re-entered the bank and left a message on top of the mountain for Dimon, whose bank Talen states "finances 80% of the Mountain-top Removal mining that is killing Appalachia" (revbilly.com "Bringing Coal Mountain Mud to Chase"). "Dear Chairman Dimon, I hope you'll join the rest of us in being shocked to discover JPMorgan Chase is putting mud to us," he pronounced (LiveFreeSpeech). The Choir sang their gospel song, "Justice Ghost," as they clapped, swayed, and danced about the lobby and down the street.

Early in March of 2010, Reverend Billy and the Church of Life After Shopping announced a new campaign. The campaign began with Matt London of United Mountain Defense who invited the group to join their cause in defense of Appalachia, according to Jen Gilomen's report on Deep Down, a website devoted to coal resistance. Reverend Billy announced his acceptance of this offer on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, saying, "We are joining thousands of activist citizens who have opposed the removal of peaks in Appalachia for 'dirty coal' mining. In resisting Consumerism, there is always an earth-justice motive, right in front of us" (revbilly.com "Have We Been to the Mountaintop") He reminds the reader of three past actions: one in the mall in Iceland to oppose big dams and aluminum smelters, another in Kauai to oppose a super ferry, and of singing to tree-sitters (revbilly.com "Have We Been to the Mountaintop"). For those who might question the relationship between this cause and the one that first stood him before the Mouse, he explains, "When you start with such a general plea as 'Stop Shopping' – your work can go in so many directions. Now, mountain-top removal, the shopping for energy that murders citizens living on the streams below and poisons the air at great distances --- now this must be our cause" (revbilly.com "Have We Been to the Mountaintop"). He concluded, "We promise our Appalachian friends that this city will not protect the bank that finances most of this violence

against the mountains” (revbilly.com “Have We Been to the Mountaintop”).

When Reverend Billy addressed the Mountaintop Removal after the Chase Bank action, he proposed that the horror of those two words, “Mountaintop Removal,” were sufficient to defeat any effort to sanitize the destruction of Appalachia’s mountains. He said, “They put billboards all over Appalachia cutting the stubborn phrase Mountaintop Removal with patriotism, with energy independence, with prosperity and education of Appalachia’s underserved youth. ... None of it works. [T]hese two words [are] standing in for the 470 missing Appalachian peaks. Mountaintop Removal” (revbilly.com “Bringing Coal Mountain Mud to Chase”).

On Easter Sunday, April 5, 2010, according to Courthouse News’ Adam Klasfeld, Reverend Billy and the Choir placed mud mountaintops at two JPMorgan Chase branches (Klasfeld). Reverend Billy and the Choir went to two East Village Chase branches, where the Choir “‘deposited’ mounds of ‘sacred dirt from Coal River Mountain, West Virginia’ on the floors of the ATM lobbies” (Klasfeld). He also reported that Reverend Billy put a “holy hex” on the Bank, which Reverend Billy said had “deforested 800 square miles and polluted more than 1,200 miles of streams” (Klasfeld).

The police arrived after Reverend Billy and the Choir arrived at the Astor Place JPMorgan Chase branch. Reverend Billy began his



performance saying, “I ask our friends from the New York Police Department who are making a living from our taxes. Amen. Hallelujah. We ask the police to join the rest of us in pulling our money out of JPMorgan Chase” (BrennysVideo). To shouts of “Mountalujah,” Reverend Billy reaffirmed that the exploded mountains would rise again. He said he had a message for the CEO of Chase, “Jamie Dimon, If you pull your billions out of dirty coal, if you stop supporting climate change, if you start supporting communities, you can retire a beloved banker” (BrennysVideo). This message was contained in a yellow plastic Easter egg, which he left on top of the mountain in Chase’s lobby (Klasfeld). The Choir then burst into song and dance. Klausfeld reported that “NYPD Officer William Svenstrup ordered [Reverend Billy] to withdraw his deposit of dirt from the bank floor” and that the Reverend refused. The crowd protested the arrest and some shouted, “Let him go.” The Choir moved off to the side and sang a hearty rendition of the “First Amendment” (BrennysVideo).

Klasfeld added a note saying the Environmental Protection Agency had requested revocation of U. S. Army Corps of Engineers permits for the Spruce No. 1 coal mine in Logan County, West Virginia, which, according to Klasfeld, is the largest mountaintop-removal project in the country.

At JPMorgan Chase's Annual Meeting of Shareholders, much of the conversation centered on their loans to companies engaged in mountain top removal. According to the minutes of that meeting, Kay Moore said the water during her childhood had been clear and drinkable, but because of mountaintop removal practices the tap water ran "brown, red, orange, yellow and black, colors that water should never be" (JPMorgan). She reported high arsenic levels in the water and she told Jamie Dimon that she provides her dog with bottled water. When Dimon said the bank did not underwrite firms that were primarily mountaintop removal companies, Moore told him that JPMorgan Chase did loan to TECO and that "50% of their coal mining is in mountaintop removal mining."

Navneeth Iyengar came to the JPMorgan event as a member of a shareholder advocacy committee at Loyola University, and explained the extent of environmental damage. The Rainforest Action Network, represented by Amanda Starbuck, reminded Dimon and the rest of the board, that they were still supporting Arc Coal and TECO Energy. She added, "We believe there is no environmentally responsible way to blow up a mountain." When asked by Starbuck, if JPMorgan would phase out financing of companies engaged in mountaintop removal, Dimon said, "At the end of the day, we do think the United States government has to determine the policy" (JPMorgan). In this way Dimon refused to allow the Bank to accept responsibility for its actions. A member of the

Responsible Endowment Coalition and Shareowner of the Sierra Club spoke on the environmental impact of mountaintop removal. He cited other concerned organizations and asked “[W]hen will you commit to making the statement [ending the bank’s financing of mountaintop removal coal mining] specific, transparent and verifiable?” (JPMorgan). Dimon did not respond to this question. Dimon did say, however, “Someone just said all this, so can you guys get together? I don’t want to be disrespectful, but can you get together before and have one person say it?” (JPMorgan). To this the shareholder responded, “We all represent different shareholders” (JPMorgan). Janelle Robins, representing Waterkeeper Alliance, offered the Alliance’s critiques of mountaintop removal and asked for a stronger statement against mountaintop removal coal mining. Dimon offered to connect her with someone in the bank to whom she could address the Waterkeeper Alliance’s concerns (JPMorgan).

The Charleston Daily Mail reported that “Reverend Billy, with the 30 voice Mountaintop Gospel Choir” would appear at the Culture Center’s Coal River Revival, on July 24, 2010. The newspaper characterized the group as an “activist church” and said that they were “appearing in Charleston as a part of the movement against mountaintop removal” (Charleston Daily Mail). The Charleston Gazette’s Bill Lynch, in his story, “Reverend Billy’s visit a call to arms against MTR,” said,

“Reverend Billy and the Mountain Top Gospel Choir are coming to town to spread their message of post-consumerism, responsible living and joy.” His message, according to Lynch, that “America’s obsession with buying and selling is destructive and unsustainable,” is too big to grasp easily. He quoted Talen as saying, “So, every year or so, we break it down into a manageable campaign. ... The question really begs not how we came to choose mountaintop removal, but what took us so long... It’s the biggest earth moving operation in the history of the world, and the people of Appalachia are trying to live through it” (Lynch).

Lynch reported that after the Upper Big Branch mine exploded, Talen said that things changed and “suddenly everybody was looking at Appalachia and coal mining” (Lynch). The Church’s tour was originally intended to rail against coal mining, but that in the months prior to the tour, “JPMorgan Chase ... agreed to stop underwriting mountaintop-removal mining” (Lynch). The tour then became “more of a celebration” with a reminder that there remained much to be done. Members of the band, Sierra, Mike, and Josh, performed a song, which they termed a narrative, rather than a protest song (BrennysVideo 8/24/10). The musically and vocally impressive performance was cheered enthusiastically by the audience.

The Reverend next took his mountaintop salvation battle to UBS bank, headquartered in Switzerland. He started in July, 2010, bullhorn

in hand, demanding that the Bank change its practices, “You were all made of the earth and because you have the knowledge of the earth in you, you will stop hurting the earth” (LiveFreeSpeech). The crowd and Choir supported him saying, “Earthalujah!” and “That’s right.” Talen continued his conversation with the UBS skyscraper, raising his arms, bullhorn, and voice, insisting UBS, “Stop blowing up mountains. You are releasing poisons from inside those mountains that are causing cancers in West Virginia and Kentucky communities. Children are dying. You’ve got to know the consequences of your money... Stop greenwashing us” (LiveFreeSpeech).

The choir was gathered in black robes outside of the bank in an open space with a faux mountaintop topped with greenery. Passersby wove between the members of the congregation, the crowd, and around the choir, generally avoiding Reverend Billy himself. Reverend Billy, in his white clerical garb and with a strong voice emphasized the durability of his mission saying, “This is the beginning of a campaign that will be relentless. The people of New York and the people of Appalachia are rising up...” (LiveFreeSpeech).

Later that month, in a sermon in his church theatre, the Reverend preached against mountaintop removal. This was filmed and mixed with images of the Appalachian mountains, and with commentary about the destructiveness of mountaintop removal. The stage is simply set, but red

curtains ring the back of the stage and light is used to create a columnar effect, which projecting a sense of strong, emotional sobriety. The cheerfulness of the choir belies the urgency of their cause and of the sermon itself. There is an abrupt emotional shift as the choir stops singing and Reverend Billy begins his sermon. He explains to the congregation that 500 mountains in Appalachia have been blown up and that the people of Appalachia are the victims of the waste from this operation, with all of the non-coal material from the mountain being pushed into the valleys and streams of Appalachia. “We must stop bombing Appalachia. We cannot continue to kill those people there so we can be comfortable here” (tenedores). Beyond the calls of, and for, “Earthalujah” and “Appalachialujah,” little is comic in the sermon. The images of destroyed Appalachian lands are impressive and sobering. This is the substance of the church which steels the moral fiber of its preacher, choir, and congregation to go onto the streets of New York and around the world demanding social and moral justice.

In November, 2010, Reverend Billy tried a very different tack. Outside of UBS Bank, at lunchtime in Midtown Manhattan, he stopped and spoke to people about mountaintop removal. In this video, the Reverend is dressed in a beige blazer and light avocado green shirt. He is accompanied by a young woman in business dress, Robin “Dragonfly” Laverne Wilson. He explained, “We talked to people without first

presenting a harsh Elvis impersonating televangelist with a radical bald/rasta haired choir” (DedicatedLaneVideo). He said that some people got intrigued, and that others get “spooked” in the middle distance. “Our method today was to speak to people up close. We sure got shut down a few times,” he explained. “But I had one guy, he just looked straight ahead. And I said, ‘ You know they’re blowing up mountains and they are doing that with UBS money, you know, it’s a bad investment and UBS has got to get out of it’ and he just looked straight ahead and he said, ‘Why don’t you blow up UBS?’ and kept walking,”

As for her process, Robin Wilson described her work saying:

I’m relentless. I’ve been a corporate street preacher ever since I moved to New York City, doing brand ambassador work. ... You learn how to approach people in a particular neighborhood. Or how to identify a particular demographic and appeal to them, or how to come up with a talking point that’s brief and gets people’s attention, and how to leave that message even if they don’t take a flyer.  
(DedicatedLaneVideo)

Then Wilson walked off with a woman telling her, “Hi lady, I just want you to know that UBS Bank is financing the destruction of our Appalachian mountain range” (DedicatedLaneVideo).

Not unexpectedly, the police interrupted his work, which shifted the Reverend’s attention to the possibility that the police are not there on city business but on the Bank’s business. He shouted to them as they left, “You don’t work for UBS” (DedicatedLaneVideo). A grandfatherly type, with a baby, explained that Talen was doing nothing but talking “in a normal voice when the police showed up to kick him off the property” (DedicatedLaneVideo). This man pointed out that the area in front of the bank is constructed to look like a public space. It looks like a broadening of the walkway, with tables and chairs. The public appears to be invited to use this area, but the sidewalk which actually belongs to the public is only a narrow strip of concrete by the street. The police allow Talen to speak to passersby from that distance. At that point in the video Talen hops back and forth across the sidewalk crack that separates the public and private space. Each hop takes him into the forbidden zone and out again, while he recites, “Mountaintop removal. MTR. It’s deadly. It’s killing people every day. BofA has gotten out of it. Credit Suisse has gotten out of it. Even JP Morgan Chase has dropped this kind of investment” (DedicatedLaneVideo). His next few hops are



accompanied by the words, “Public, Private, Public, Private” (Dedicated LaneVideo).

Late November, 2010, ushered in another holiday season, and as would be expected, Reverend Billy Talen took to the streets and airwaves again to preach, cajole, and shame a bit. This November was just a bit different though. The Reverend began his holiday festivities early Friday morning on “Buy Nothing Day,” by imploring shoppers at Macy’s to back away from the product. Later in the day, however, he and the Choir shifted their focus from shopping to environmental protest. They made their way to UBS Bank to sermonize against the bank’s financing of mountaintop removal in Appalachia (Yakas). The *Gothamist* reports that Reverend Billy, and the white-robed Choir, swarmed the UBS building, which resulted in Reverend Billy spending the night in the Tombs, yet again.

### **The home planet**

The year’s engagement in mountaintop defense impelled Reverend Billy further into an environmental commitment. He named his October tour “The Earth-a-llujah Earth-a-llujah Revival” (revbilly.com). Savitri D and Reverend Billy had received the 2010 Alpert Award for Theatre, which helped finance the project. The tour took place in California, beginning on October 18<sup>th</sup> at the REDCAT Theatre, Disney Hall, in Los Angeles. The irony tickled the Reverend who wrote, “This church was

founded on the discovery that MICKEY MOUSE IS THE ANTI-CHRIST so please come help us embrace our contradictions” (revbilly.com).

The Los Angeles Times theatre review, in addition to its approval of the “wit and unabashed showmanship,” which Reverend Billy and the Choir brought to the stage, underscored the social message of the performance. Reviewer, Charlotte Stoudt, noticed that Reverend Billy now had twin obsessions. She described the Church’s revival as “part of their nationwide tour to end American overconsumption and environmental ruin” (Stoudt). His sermon, according to Stoudt, linked the purchase and use of electronics to greater demand for cheap electricity, 40% of which is generated by coal. In this way, Talen did not so much “preach to the choir,” as to demand something of his already sympathetic audience.

The performance itself was a robust presentation of the Reverend’s protest philosophy which combines bombastic performance with social critique. Stoudt described Reverend Billy as looking “like Val Kilmer impersonating Elvis” and sounding “like Stephen Colbert impersonating Billy Graham.” The choir sang “fervent gospel-inflected ditties against rent-raising gentrification, the devolution of democracy into capitalism, and restrictions against gay marriage” (Stoudt).

The following Saturday, Reverend Billy Talen officiated at the ecosexual marriage of Annie M. Sprinkle, Elizabeth M. Stephens, and

the Moon. This art project, titled “Purple Wedding to the Moon,” was produced “to inspire more love for our environment and for each other,” according to the wedding invitation (Sprinkle and Stephens). Savitri D called the wedding an intervention piece, which addressed the consumerism and materialism of weddings, and the right to marry. CalArts students assisted in the production of the wedding which was held at Farnsworth Park in Altadena and was open to the public. Guests were asked to wear purple, and dress in theme(s) of the wedding, which focused on “the romantic, ecosensual love of nature” (Sprinkle and Stephens). Reverend Billy Talen wore white.

After leaving Los Angeles, the Church troupe performed at the Rio Theatre in Santa Cruz and the Victoria Theatre, in the Mission District of San Francisco. In an interview with Wallace Bane, of the Santa Cruz Sentinel, Reverend Billy distanced himself from progressives whose “impulse is to make people read neo-Marxist arguments and essays” (Bane). “We don’t want to do that,” Reverend Billy added. Bane described the revival’s message as “one of dire environmentalism delivered with equal measures of urgency and showmanship” (Bane).

The anti-consumerist message, while well grounded in community, always had within it the ability to explore issues of social justice. The campaign supporting the right of Ethiopia to trademark its historic coffee bean names and the protests against Disney’s use of child labor were two

such objectives. The destruction of Appalachia's mountains propelled Talen even more fiercely in the direction of social justice. Finding a readymade, "mature" community of Earth activists and believers may well have made the Reverend feel less like a lone wolf. With his heroic embrace of environmentalism, the Reverend's anti-consumerist philosophy, together with its related campaigns, became part of a much larger movement. As evidenced by the Coal Mountain Revival, United Mountain Defense, and the Purple Wedding to the Moon relationships, the embrace was mutual. While Talen appreciated the expansive community of environmentalists, the movement found in him name recognition, media connections, and an appealing comic approach often missing in earnest progressive movements.

What more could Reverend Billy Talen need to make his life complete? He had emerged as the dominant force in Bill Talen's compendium of personas. That adopted persona became his life. On September 11, 2001, Reverend Billy undertook a true pastor's calling. By the end of 2008, his audience had begun to show up with the regularity of parishioners. What then did preacher and congregation lack? Having grown so haphazardly together from an adventure in performance art, might some additional force be needed to complete Reverend Billy's vocation? As it turns out, something fundamental was missing. By the end of 2010, it became clear to the Reverend that his

ministry comprised a powerfully committed assembly that lacked a credo.

On January 23, 2011, The Reverend Billy Talen proposed a new idea to his online flock from his Facebook page. He suggested, without too much pomp, that in less than a week a new church, “The Church of Earthaluja,” would preview. He had renamed the Church quite a few times, but this time it was different. He requested this of his congregants, “Bring your beliefs to the new religion: The Church of Earthalujah.” The term “religion” was catchy in its boldness. He proposed a number of beliefs to launch the idea:

We believe in the Life of the Earth.

We believe that the Fabulous Unknown is watching us  
through the eyes of dying blackbirds.

We believe that there is more breathtaking mystery in a  
thimbleful of Earth than any god or pentagon or  
industrial chicken farm.

We believe beauty begins when life begins. Supermodels  
and art forms are beautiful until they sell  
things.

We believe that forgiveness and gratitude are totally hip.

We believe that the Fabulous Unknown is anything but a  
Fundamentalist.

We believe that Localalujah is Goodalujah!

We believe that the Sumatra tsunami and our next breath  
are part of the same living thing.

We believe that all the gods and their chosen people tribes  
must do their community service at compost  
schools in Vermont, so that the Fabulous  
Unkown (sic) can gather the children and  
decide what to do with us. (Talen “Bring Your  
Beliefs”)

Like the “call and response” of other participatory religions, Reverend Billy Talen’s adherents responded with enthusiasm. Throughout the day, approximately seventy people stated that they “liked” the Reverend’s concept. Thirty-eight comments were posted in response to his call. These people whom Reverend Billy would later dub “Earth-believers,” affirmed his community’s belief in social justice for the earth, its inhabitants, its rivers, air, mountains, and streams. Reverend Billy, quite early that day before even half the affirmations were posted, declared, “[T]hese beliefs deserve their own religion” (Reverend Billy Talen 1/23/11).

The next week, Reverend Billy woke up, as preachers sometimes do, wrestling with his faith. He told his online congregation, “I woke up this morning faced with what we’ll do today - what? - What IS this? We’re

starting a new religion? Really? Wait a minute. Do people do this every day? Or hasn't it been done since the homophobic Mormons” (Reverend Billy Talen 1/23/22). He, the bombastic televangelist, bane of Starbucks worldwide, worried that his training was not enough to save him from this sense of foolishness, “but today oh I’m feeling the fool” (Reverend Billy Talen 1/23/11). He decided that he and the Choir should pray “to the Fabulous Unknown, which is our comic hero non-deity who mysteriously embodies Life on Earth” (Reverend Billy Talen 1/23/11). These reflections and commitment to a life of prayer to the Earth, according to Talen, should alter man’s current murderous course (Reverend Billy Talen 1/23/11). He found his spiritual footing saying, “I’m a believer again. You see, the church has got to be worth it, even if the Earthalujah is absolutely clumsy or – bad performance art” (Reverend Billy Talen 1//23/11). He continued his argument in favor of the church, noting rising carbon dioxide emissions, a propensity toward ecocide, malaise instead of action, the failure of other churches, people, or governments to take serious action. “[T]he Earth needs such a revolution. The air we breathe, the mountains and forests and the water that arrange the physical integrity of our living - need it. Doesn't it seem that the Earth is calling out to its governing species with its recent bouquet of killer storms and flood and fire - that we must change radically?” (Reverend Billy Talen 1/23/11).

In this way, Reverend Billy Talen, formerly Bill Talen, performance artist, committed to his new religion. “Earthalujah! Let's start a hard-core religion with the Earth as our all-powerful all-knowable. Let's be so full of Earth faith that millions of green zealots flood Washington. Non-violent fanatics for the Earth. Are you fond of the image? Do you see the Promised Land?” he professed to his interconnected global audience of like believers. He found his voice in prayer to the Fabulous Unknown because through that prayer he felt “the Earth enters the conversation,” offering him both rhymes and miracles.

Reverend Billy and the Choir presented “The Church of Earthalujah” to the congregation, both live and online. There were problems with the live video feed, but both audiences seemed to understand that an important social premise, inclusive of and beyond performance, was being staged inside of Theatre 80, in New York.

“Earthalujah!” the Reverend called to his audience of apostles. To which they eagerly responded, “Earthalujah!” and a new religion was born.

### **Moving forward**

The Reverend’s new religion, while bold in its declaration and purpose, can be seen more simply as another transformative moment in Talen’s journey. From the time he barked on the streets of New Orleans, until he grudgingly came to accept Lanier’s challenge to see the



performance art in religious performance, to the donning of his collar on 9/11, Talen's work has been a steady progress leading inexorably to this moment.

Talen's early poems led to the identity crisis which then led to Talen becoming the Reverend Billy, because the poems' social focus was then, and has always been, his driving force. Talen's initial performances of Reverend Billy, which he donned for play and effect, created character renditions which were clearly crafted, and then honed, modified and directed. He then worked tirelessly to reshape these characters and performances to better embody the power and spirit which moved him personally. This is how the stage was set for his unique transformation from the performer into the performed—because the message, the plot's through line, was always Talen's own zealous arc. It is easy to see, when reflecting upon the events that led up to Talen's becoming Reverend Billy, that if a person works to build a character which fully and effectively embodies his most essential belief system, there may come a time when that character might be worn more comfortably than the social construction of the person into whom he was born.

Even though today Talen might be embarrassed at the clumsy construction of some of his early work, such as occasionally naïve attempts at writing poetry modeled after the legends of his time, his performance of Howl, or the public discomfort required at times to follow

the Reverend's passions. All of this was essential in that it gave Reverend Billy depth and meaning far beyond the staging of a character. As he studied the talents of other performance artists and televangelists, he developed a keen ear for the poetics of the language, and a sharp eye for the embodiment of the role, always looking for new dialogic opportunities between character and audience.

With each complex layer that Talen added to the Reverend Billy, Talen respected the Reverend more. Imagine for a moment Talen's first full appreciation of Jesus as a performance artist. For a person raised in Talen's taut social milieu, the joy of imagining how Jesus prepared for his performances, chose to represent his spiritual goals, and took his work onto a public stage must have been titillating. As Talen came to appreciate the implications of Jesus' artistic work, he opened the door to a broader spectrum of public performance. While that did not come into fruition until Talen moved to New York, it paved the way for him to stand at a pulpit before the Disney Store and call to the passersby.

Jesus' performance might be a bit dated for today's audience, but the modern televangelist understood the power of the camera and the performative requirements of televised religion. Talen, as a theatrical practitioner, saw, mimicked, and extended the skills of the televangelist into a public persona that shredded the borders between acting and not-acting. While he parodied much of televangelism, he did this not for the

sake of criticizing the televangelist, although some small measure of that critique exists, but to redirect the attention of the audience to his true socio-economic, cultural, and political concerns. This took the possibilities of Jesus' performance to an immediate global audience, engaging in its own dialectic discourse, and giving Reverend Billy a post-modern appeal.

We must also credit Talen and the theatrical community for much of the nuance that allows Reverend Billy to exist as a public persona, a social actor, and a compassionate person. Every theatrical artist has developed techniques which allow him to feel, physically and emotionally, a character's social position and emotional reserve, and in doing so effectively portray a densely wrought, physical performance. Imagining the performative aspects of a social actor from two thousand years ago and appreciating the skill of a staged televangelist appealing to his audience, falls short of the realization that a skilled actor brings to his work. While the first two layers are socially useful, it is the ability to effectively embody a role, that brings a character to life. Talen's theatrical training is what allowed the Reverend to become recognized beyond any theatrical stage. Further, since Reverend Billy, when fully realized, embodies Talen's critical social stances, it is not surprising that Talen's persona came to merge with that of Reverend Billy.

These complex layers of knowledge and performance, which Talen nurtured, examined, and tested over the course of his professional lifetime followed a sequential growth and depth. He transformed himself from poet to actor, to performance activist, and then into spiritual leader. At the same time, he eroded many of the borders that shape social interaction. Some he challenged willfully, eagerly moving from poet to performance poet, savoring the transition from talking to singing, from acting given over to ritual, and then on to the purposeful destruction of social ritual as a way of breaking through the entrapments that cause so many to work to support a consumerist economy. This was not a chronological development. Rather Talen challenged most pre-conceived notions about art, performance, and social construct as he encountered them.

It is therefore not so surprising that Talen would allow the border between himself and his character to dissolve over time. The personality that people develop over the course of their lifetimes is fashioned by each individual as a way of interacting with, and reflecting upon, social opportunities and pressures. Since all personality is socially constructed, it is not too bold a step for an actor to fashion for himself a persona more suited to his goals and concerns. This might be especially true for Talen, who would never have been comfortable with the socially constructed persona expected of his Midwest, Dutch Calvinist upbringing.

Even though I had earlier called Talen's adopting of Reverend Billy's persona as his own an identity "crisis," the term "crisis" is ill-suited to this situation because Talen's shift in identity was purposeful and chosen. Furthermore, Talen designed this Reverend Billy persona himself, in much the same way that all individuals craft personality to meet social needs. The primary difference here is that Talen made a break from his role as "actor," choosing instead to become the character on a permanent basis, and then evolving from that character into a social activist. In doing so, he fully absorbed all that the Reverend Billy character had to offer in the way of foundational, and functional, social positions and perspectives. Talen was always committed to his social causes, however, as Reverend Billy, he had a much more powerful way to attract the attention of the media, and to draw his audience away from their daily activities and towards a more spiritual and earth-centric religion.

Talen's and Reverend Billy's story has been one of a series of transformational changes. The transformational aspects of his journey change now because Talen has fully integrated as the Reverend Billy Talen. He no longer has to search for who he is, or push against the advice of his mentor, Lanier, or find a way to interact with either his immediate community, or the larger social structures which surround him. Talen appears to be excited about the challenging work he has

ahead. He can speak authoritatively from a large body of work, much of which now focuses on man's relationship with the Earth, and its ecological systems.

This is not to say that there will be no more transformative moments. Talen is a capable, curious, energetic man. He is a skilled performance artist who has spent his life exploring his art. This talent is critical now in order for him to successfully impact the society which surrounds him. He is up against enormous odds. His vision for life, community, and society is very different from the society in which he lives. He is challenging a socio-economic political structure that cares little about community, or the wonderful sound of a neighbor laughing, freely and boldly. We only hear such laughter when the community is the home and center of each person's universe. Currently our larger society has far greater importance than the immediacy of neighborhood. This being so, people rarely see their community as a unique treasure that should be privileged, sheltered, and then integrated into a larger social whole.

Talen, however, sees the constraints placed upon neighborhood, community, and individual. He also recognizes that when the community is not valued, society may strip it of its resources, individuality, and strengths, with impunity. Talen recognizes the constructed nature of everyday life and that recognition pushes him to point out the

constructed nature of the world which most assume is natural. He preaches locally, and globally, of the restrictive nature of our society, which demands compliance with its rules and values.

Talen's personal transformations may be behind him, but as a talented artist many opportunities lie ahead for him. He constantly searches for new ways to impact and change society in order to benefit neighborhoods and their citizens. He has not been concerned with the long days necessary to orchestrate challenging events which unmask social structures which benefit few, but at great cost to the people and their communities. If these communities fail, then the Earth itself is at great risk because it too is being plundered of its strengths and resources.

Talen's focus now will likely be on expanding his art and his network of like thinkers. His art will need to adapt to each new challenge that arises. The Earth is being impacted in new and unique ways as our socio-economic system strives always to find better ways to draw its resources from it. These efforts create unique environments which will present new opportunities and challenges to the Reverend, both as an artist and as a spiritual leader. It is impossible to say now what those challenges will be or how Talen, and his followers, will confront them.

Technological innovations are common today and they will likely play a part in the confrontation between our global socio-economic

structure and the small, but determined, Church of Earthalujah. It is difficult for me to imagine the Church itself growing to multiple, strong congregations throughout the land. Fortunately, one of Talen's strengths is his willingness to join his work with that of other like-minded artists and activists. I would expect to see a continuation of the current work by Talen, his wife, Savitri, and his followers to participate with other artists and environmental groups forestalling efforts to reduce land and community to nothing more than profit. Talen's work in theatre and theatrical ventures will be a great asset as he helps to coordinate the efforts of multiple activist groups, sometimes showcasing his own productions, and sometimes allowing other groups to take the lead. He brings to these new social networks an understanding of spiritual connectivity that is sometimes missing from sincere, but merely desperate, environmental actions. My hope would be that Talen could create a spiritual community of activists, of a global scope, who could work and support each other. He has made that effort in confronting the mining industry in Appalachia and Iceland. He has two major concerns with which he is intensely engaged—hydraulic fracturing, “fracking,” and climate change. There are many groups set to fight fracking and to create awareness of the impacts of climate change. Both of these threats are necessary projects of the Church of Earthalujah. Fortunately, there are many artists and protest groups eager to participate in these projects,



which will present Talen with a great opportunity to instill a spiritual calling into discussions of the planet as home.

## APPENDIX

### INTERVIEW WITH BILL TALEN

NEW YORK CITY, DECEMBER 22, 2011

**Thomas:** When did you first encounter New York?

**Talen:** New York was really Oz to me. I used to sit in Watertown, South Dakota, and I was 9, and I was actually dreaming that the satellites were the island of Manhattan. I came to New York for the first time in 73. I was a friend of Charles Gaines, a high school writing instructor, who put me and my girlfriend up in Soho. I lived on 6<sup>th</sup> and Ave C. There were muggings and rapes; it was just a free-for-all, but I don't know if that is why I moved away.

**Thomas:** What was your Bachelor's in in Franconia?

**Talen:** I majored in creative writing. I got a bachelor's in that. I visited New York often while going to Franconia. The move in 73 to NYC was to live initially. Then I moved to New Hampshire, then Philadelphia, and the NYC and then all over the place. I didn't really have a place. I was just squatting. My writing teacher Charles Gaines was author of "Pumping Iron." I was big guy—a body builder. I'd be up on the interstate looking like Conan. I'd be swept up in a

peripatetic as the 70s were open to that. I'd end up in a ranch family for a month or so and fall in love with daughter.

I left New York in 76 when I had memorized "Howl" and started performing it right her at St. Mark's on the marathon poetry night right here at St. Mark's—and he gestured to St. Mark's just a few blocks away. The marathon was on New Year's day. I couldn't get to Allen to get permission. So I was just doing it. I was this hippie in jeans. And I was part of the culture there at St. Marks. I only planned to do that first section. I thought I was doing great. Then a hand came across and that was Allen. Then I was surrounded by the beautiful women that took me to this ex-cult in the housed owned by a watcher.

I was trying to get away from something that was troubling. So then I went to the beat culture in Bolinas. So I did not get away from the beat. And everybody knew about it.

I kept going and worked through it. And I gave Allen a really good payday. I produced him there just before his death. I was crushed. Oh my ego. Oh so young with self-conscious hopes and I was like kind of a hero or a casualty. In the 60s

it wasn't clear sometimes. How megalomaniacal. My writing and my poetry were influenced by Hart Crane and John Ashbury. And so I had a love of what for most people was obscure imagery. I loved obscure poetry and its imagery. Federico Lorca in New York was another. So I would get up in front of people and be open, but the words coming out of my mouth were implacably unfollowable, because Hart Crane, John Ashbury, and Lorca's poetry was not necessarily intended to be spoken. Otis Brown, Marty Watt, for instance, said, "Hey, hey, hey, you can't just be reading from a piece of paper. You have to gesture and look people in the eye." What I was doing was having this expansive actor embrace them and this put people in a schizophrenic position. Because then the words coming out of my mouth would be .... . People would like to like me, 10 minutes, and then 20 minutes, and then 30 minutes. I was able to go on and on and on because art was a fuck out form in the 70s. I was not immune to this. That was in me a little bit.

**Thomas:** What year did you graduate from Franconia?

**Talen:** 1973. Jan 1<sup>st</sup> 76 is when Allen hurt my feelings and then off to Bolinas.

**Thomas:** What year did you graduate San Francisco State?

**Talen:** The student loans were a way of making money, via student loans, I wasn't interested in studying theatre. When I pulled out of the Allen Ginsberg nightmare, I had developed a long poem Auroa, that was choreographed in its construction, with a 1945 international harvester. The poem was about hitchhiking and the motif was about in the idle of the night with nothing but the dark and the night and then there's this circus on the horizon, and it's an 18 wheeler, and because of the size of the prairie this might take a half an hour to arrive. And it was like a photograph, I had a flash of a second to leap into his lights. And he'd see me for just a second. And this formalized what I was doing in the 70s.

Then back to New York City in 1984 and I had another huge public collapse. There something called the Economy Tires – a dance theatre workshop. It was so sexy because in 1982 the performer from the West coast was Bill Irwin and in 1983 it was Whoopie Goldberg and she went straight into the Color purple, and now the third person was me, sent by the same producer, that was me. I fell on my face, trashed, bad reviewed. I'm still hard on Alicia Solomon. The same producer that sent me was Jack Davis. We were all people

that performed at his theatre called *Intersection for the Arts*.  
There were bad reviews all around.

I think I suffered from my lack of professional training. I was  
had performed and got good reviews in the LA times, but I  
didn't really have a director that broke it down. My directors  
were too easy on me. I was suffering from the idea that this  
would come from me. I was nailed and creamed. "The Pre-  
Star Condition." And the "American Yoga." "America  
Yoga." It was a slow motion. The idea was that it like yoga.  
That was Mel Gussow, a cadaverous old critic that loved  
Whoopi.

I feel like that we are in a moment like with climate change.  
We are skidding; we don't know how to react to an  
emergency because we are purged of the apocalypse because  
so many of the big films are about simulated apocalypse.

**Thomas:** Why did you move from Wisconsin to Franconia?

**Talen:** I was in the Michel John Experimental School in Madison.  
There was a couple of year break in there. On the last day  
the Army Mass Research Center blew up, bombed by  
activists. I started between 70 and 73. I was wandering a lot.

**Thomas:** Did you study theatre in high school?

**Talen:** In high school I studied poetry with Charles Gaines.

**Thomas:** You read others' poems in SFSU in 1975. How was it different to read or perform other people's poetry since you usually wrote and performed your own?

**Talen:** I performed a Sam Shepard short story.

**Thomas:** What is a "network poet" as you described yourself in Evening Sky? What is a network poet?

**Talen:** I'm not familiar with that term.

**Thomas:** Why did you think of Bolinas as a "strange choice?"

**Talen:** It was beat too like what I was running away from.

**Thomas:** Did you work as a stuntman, audition for film? Did you have any early adventures with film?

**Talen:** I was sent down to LA by Brebner, Ann, a powerful SF agent. I was there in 1983 / 1984 and she set me up with a wonderful agency. And I kind of revolted. I was already a monologist, I'd already taken a class with Spaulding Grey in 1981 and I was drawn to finding a way to perform my own

writing and the going back to writing was very difficult for me. I was there for 10 months and I went from there to the debacle at dance theatre workshop. And the winter of 84/85 and I think it was Feb of 85. It was cold in New York. I just returned to San Francisco, where I still had to write. I tried continue. Too many goddamn girlfriends. I don't know what happened.

Bolinas was not necessarily connected to the New York scene. Ken Botto, the photographer, an installation photographer, had a big influence on my work, as did Joanne Kieger. It was really Charles Fox and Walter Mertz (sound design for Star Wars) that had an influence. I found Steve Lerner to be a very influential person I found in Bolinas. He was part of the Commonweal and they were exploring toxins and how to raise children who might otherwise be criminals, asking what was the impact of healthy diet on. I worked for them for a while in SF. I was so broke. Even then my basic desire – through the late 70s and early 80s—I would watch the lights of San Francisco across the bay and I would dream of going back there. I did move there. Then LA, New York, and then back to San Francisco. In 85, I started Life on the Water theatre. That was my



major move of committing to the Bay Area and the way to commit to this place was to have a theatre that was big enough to be reviewed and had a substantial place. A 250 seat theatre---just big enough to be reviewed in in the Chronicle. Pitt and Sebastian, that was before we started, got commitments from the Chronicle that we would be reviewed. Joe Lambert was the fourth person. And part of it was our notoriety. Joe Lambert couldn't pay the rent. Mark Kaskay—from Franconia—he ran Fort Mason center. 50-60 NGOS and restaurants. My father remembers it from shipping out with the Liberty ships in World War II. Spaulding Gray was the opening performer at Life on the Water—Swimming to Cambodia. So he put us on the map. He was on the cover of New York Times Magazine. He stuck with us. He got pressure from agents to sign with other theatres. But he stuck with us. For 7 years we outmaneuvered ACT and Berkley Rep. So we were able to hold our position. We were during the Regan years one of the few theatres to grow the way we did. American Theatre Magazine recognized us. We brought people in from Russia after the wall fell. We brought Australian aborigines, German monologists, during those 7 years, before it blew up in our faces. I paid myself by staging one of my own plays each year. And I had this nattily

dressed man in his 60s who came back to the green room after the show; he had an accent from somewhere mid-Atlantic, British. He took me to lunch, “We need a new kind of American preacher.” And he proceeded to debate me. For one thing I told him I told him I didn’t want anything to do with Christians. Let somebody else. Fuck them. I was beaten up by Calvinists. He kept pressing me and healing me. So he took me to the most amazing Christian services, where my eyes were opened. In Life on the Water we were producing monologists. That was something I did. Danny Hoch, Reno, Holly Hughes, David Cale, Abner the Eccentric, Danny Glover, reciting, poems from the Harlem, BD Wong from Butterfly.

Baptist Pentecostal. I would end up like passing out, falling asleep, but one time I ended up on the altar. Very powerful stuff. I realized from this that some of the theatre of reciting poetry, 70s performance art, had nothing on the altered states of these services. He taught me to turn off the content and appreciate of preaching. Appreciate the music. It is a traditional American performance like the Blues. Appreciate it for what it is. We are here to reinvent it so shut off the content. So he also took me to walk me around the church

introduced me to Jesus and Mary Magdalene, his producer, he too. He took me to linguists about what he actually said versus what others made up.

I became his project. I started responding to this. It was like a European mentor.

Jock Reynolds I took one class at SFSU and it was like I was already doing it and Jock said, "Okay, he wants a degree." It was like write your own degree. So I got an MA without trying.

But now I was learning. He taught me some lessons that I am still using every day. American's make a lot of their meaning out of bible stories. Like Clint Eastwood in High Plains drifter. He comes into town, rents a room over the tavern, then he starts having dreams,. People start getting interested in him. A woman falls in love with him. Turns out the town is traumatized. Last sheriff was murdered, by his own bullwhip. And so finally there's a dwarf. They corner him. They say you are a powerful man; we want you to be our sheriff. Clint says, "Okay but you must do what I say." He says to paint the town red. The tough guys see this.

Meanwhile Clint is dreaming the evil of the town. He is like constructing the evil of the town. The gang is finally enticed out of the mountains. He kills them one-by-one. He kills the leader by his own whip, like the previous sheriff. Then the little person is seen putting a gravestone over the sheriff. Clint rides out of town and Clint says, "Well the sheriff got his name back." The dwarf says, "Wait I never knew your name."

Sidney said, "Hey that's a Jesus story and 70% of Hollywood is." This is a Jesus story because a mysterious man walks into your psyche. The Machiavelli of the spirit.

Another thing that Sidney did is I went behind his back and figured out who he was. He was Tennessee Williams cousin. He went into the Caribbean and then he came back. Came to St Thomas's on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Then one day. He'd become a good friend of Lenny Bruce's. How to talk dirty and influence people. On the stand in Bruce's trial. He was this Episcopal priest. An authoritarian. He has the sermon industrialists, bankers. He does a Lenny Bruce thing and calls their identity into question.

Why for instance is this St. Thomas? Why is this not a whore house? In this was Thomas Lanier Williams. His cousin. Laughing. This is the first scene in Night of the Iguana. That opening scene he drives everybody into the rain as he has a meltdown.

So anyway I found out about his pedigree as a cultural icon. Then he started St. Clement's and began "American Place Theatre" and seeded the idea of the publicly workshopped play and Sidney was part of Lee Strasberg's world---Dustin Hoffman etc. and began to perform there. Eugene O'Neill. Sydney tore the altar out of St' Clements that time. At the same time as (Hooty?) xxx out of St Marks's Church. Judson memorial. A movement to merge the spiritual to theatre. Somebody should write a book about. And Howard and Sydney are in their late 80s and they are both alive. There is some documentary footage. The wall between sacred theatre and the secular theatre was collapsing and for centuries they held each other in derision and kings and kings would kill off the secular theatre and they would murder them off. Look magazine etc. would write about what a big deal it was to let theatre take place in their sanctuaries. I got Howard and

Sydney in a room together and made them talk for hours and hours and hours.

In my 40s, this mesmerizing man came and took me out of my life. I was a middle-class man. I had already not made it in New York twice. In stellar fashion, I collapsed. I remained in pre-star condition much of my life. I made theatre in San Francisco. And here's this man who lives near my theatre—he and his wife—ran a new age salon and a so I found myself. As they started funding my work I started meeting people—Theodore Roszak, who wrote about the psychosis of denatured environments—I found myself with people (Jacob Needleman, Daniel Ellsberg, with the crème del la crème of new age people ). Sydney and Jean were philanthropists and funding some of them. He hired me away from Fort mason. So when I was performing in front of the Disney Store, having been put there by Sydney, I was being funded to some extent by Sydney, and I was waiting tables. But his final stroke of genius was to leave me in front of the Disney Store. I was saying nothing was happening in New York in the 1990s. He said, "Billy, always invest in New York when blood is running in the streets." That was borne out. He was still reading this place. Standing in front of Disney,

made me a self-conscious, sidewalk preacher, I look like a right-wing televangelist. They come and do this. It is like being in Afghanistan; they get their stripes. So leaving me in front of the Disney store, developing a theology of Mickey Mouse as the devil. Just as Giuliani and the New York Times were cleaning up Times Square. And in no time I was getting written up in the New York Times. I was having a bit of a status panic. What was I doing in front of the Disney Store. Sidney was saying, “Look Americans need to have religious symbols.” And lots of weird atheists, and artists that know that just play to that. He said Lenny had a rabbi, his mother as a religious figure, nuns and priests, and a televangelist, and a Jewish kid from Brooklyn, and he had an Imam. He played every religious figure he could. He taught me that is where so much that is political, economic, military, comes from in the Promised Land—coming here, and looking for the Garden of Eden. You have to look at the prevailing winds inside the psyche of Americans. Get over how you were raised. Turn and be responsible to your fellow citizens, turn and help them out. I love Sydney. I love Spaulding, Kurt Vonnegut, and weird as I am I had these wonderful people come into my life and say, “Keep it up.”

Sidney would say of me, “If you met him somewhere, this guy is made for playing something. He has a natural quality, presence. He is by his very nature kind like Christ incarnate.” Don’t quote me. “But in the incarnate, he was much, much more of a spoken word, not a written word. He is not a writer. He is much more effective when it is spoken through him. He was willing to get up and do the televangelist word. He is a natural born preacher. This country produces preachers. I encouraged him to do so. That was my recognition of a natural-born proclaimer. If I was directing him, I take him down a notch or two, and give the audience a little breathing space. If he asks whether you can you give him any tips or advice, I would tell him to ask you and if he thinks it is nonsense then forget the whole scene. I think what I did was support him in finding his own way. What I did was encourage him in the right way. I did very simple directing really and he had a good sense of the audience.” That’s what I think Sidney would say.

**Thomas:** Did you do “Slow White Heterosexual Man” in France, or use Harry?

**Talen:** I toured back through Paris; first European Tour was in 1985 Lyon. Cousin Harry was like a Sam Shepard play. They



liked me when they did like me in Europe because I looked like Sam Sheppard. That was another of a series of disasters.

In retrospect I'm able to make sense of things and make it look as if there were a plan. But after Rev Billy began in 1999 and 2000 there was Jonathan Kalb, Jill Lane, and Schneckener, all paid considerable attention. And Alisa Solomon.

**Thomas:** I'm wondering just what route you to New Orleans when you hitchhiked there.

**Talen:** 67 and 68 I went to New Orleans. Gaines was Vonnegut's student at University of Iowa, a writers workshop. And Gaines' wife also helped me to meet Kurt Vonnegut through mutual friends. Then there was an extraordinary 5 year friendship with him.

**Thomas:** Talk to me about the poem, "The Plan is the Body," you recite a small part of it during a Starbucks' intervention.

**Talen:** “The Plan is the Body” is an extraordinary statement by Robert Creeley. We were friendly, but we never spent the time together that we promised that we would. He was living up in Maine.

“The Plan is the Body” says that we already have the solution in us and the design is stated by the life that we are living. We learned that in “Occupy Wall Street” and we learned that by living together 24 hours a day, and we aimed that “living” at the towering structures of Wall Street. And that turned out to be a devastating protest form. Living in the commons and aiming that living is a devastating protest form. We are often trying to invent something like that, Machiavellian solutions, cleverness, in fact, it is us. And what made this huge army of the NYPD, a 35,000 person army, so mesmerized by us, was that in public were were living together. We were living our bodies. And that is all in Zuccoti Square.

And that’s just what Walt Whitman taught us.

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